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...MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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MURDER UNDER THE MISTLETOE

Christmas Mysteries and Other Stories

JOYCE PORTER

PETER LOVESEY

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By Alvin Tresselt, *Dean of Faculty*

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Alvin Tresselt, Dean of Faculty, was Executive Editor of Parents' Magazine Press, the first editor of *Humpty Dumpty's Magazine*, and a board member of the Author's Guild. His 53 books for young readers have sold over two million copies.

But, that's not all. The financial rewards go far beyond most people's expectations because there's a surprisingly big market out there for writers who are trained to tap it. Over $1 *billion* worth of children's books are purchased annually—some 4,000 different titles—many by new authors.

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In this holiday season, the editors of EQMM *would like to thank the man who makes it possible for us to bring you the gifts of the many talented writers who contribute to these pages. Joel Davis launched Davis Publications with his father, Bernard G. Davis, in 1957 with the purchase of* Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. *In 1969, when his father retired, Joel Davis became president of the company. In subsequent years he acquired several other leading magazines, including* Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine. EQMM *and* AHMM *have flourished in an era when all the other nationally distributed digest-sized mystery magazines have ceased publication, thanks to the skill and commitment of Joel Davis, and the personal interest he takes in the authors he publishes.* EQMM *and* AHMM *have published between them, since their inception, well over ten thousand stories, launching many impressive writing careers. In recognition of this important contribution to the mystery field, the Mystery Writers of America honored Joel Davis in 1990 with the Ellery Queen Award. We hope you'll join us in raising a glass to Davis Publications' president before partaking of the splendid holiday feast prepared by Peter Lovesey and our other distinguished contributors . . .*

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a *NEW* short story by

PETER LOVESEY

The moment Fran had seen the invitation, she'd known she would accept. Three or four times in her life she'd felt a similar impulse and each time she had been right. She didn't think of herself as psychic or telepathic, but sometimes she felt guided by some force that couldn't be explained scientifically. A good force, she was certain . . .

SUPPER WITH MISS SHIVERS

by PETER LOVESEY

The door was stuck. Something inside was stopping it from opening, and Fran was numb with cold. School had broken up for Christmas that afternoon—"Lord dismiss us with Thy blessing"—and the jubilant kids had given her a blinding headache. She'd wobbled on her bike through the London traffic, two carriers filled with books suspended from the handlebars. She'd endured exhaust fumes and maniac motorists, and now she couldn't get into her own flat. She cursed, let the bike rest against her hip, and attacked the door with both hands.

"It was quite scary, actually," she told Jim when he got in later. "I mean, the door opened perfectly well when we left this morning. We could have been burgled. Or it could have been a body lying in the hall."

Jim, who worked as a systems analyst, didn't have the kind of imagination that expected bodies behind doors. "So what was it—the doormat?"

"Get knotted. It was a great bundle of Christmas cards wedged under the door. Look at them. I blame you for this, James Palmer."

"Me?"

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Now that she was over the headache and warm again, she enjoyed poking gentle fun at Jim. "Putting our address book on your computer and running the envelopes through the printer. This is the result. We're going to be up to our eyeballs in cards. I don't know how many you sent, but we've heard from the plumber, the dentist, the television repairman, and the people who moved us in, apart from family and friends. You must have gone straight through the address book. I won't even ask how many stamps you used."

"What an idiot," Jim admitted. "I forgot to use the sorting function."

"I left some for you to open."

"I bet you've opened all the ones with checks inside," said Jim. "I'd rather eat first."

"I'm slightly mystified by one," said Fran. "Do you remember sending to someone called Miss Shivers?"

"No. I'll check if you like. Curious name."

"It means nothing to me, but she's invited us to a meal."

Fran handed him the card—one of those desolate, old-fashioned snow scenes of someone dragging home a log. Inside, under the printed greetings, was the signature *E. Shivers (Miss)*, followed by *Please make my Christmas—come for supper seven next Sunday, 23rd.* In the corner was an address label.

"Never heard of her," said Jim. "Must be a mistake."

"Maybe she sends her cards by computer," said Fran, and added, before he waded in, "I don't think it's a mistake, Jim. She named us on the envelope. I'd like to go."

"For crying out loud—Didmarsh is miles away. Berkshire or somewhere. We're far too busy."

"Thanks to your computer, we've got time in hand," Fran told him with a smile.

The moment she'd seen the invitation, she'd known she would accept. Three or four times in her life she'd felt a similar impulse and each time she had been right. She didn't think of herself as psychic or telepathic, but sometimes she felt guided by some force that couldn't be explained scientifically. A good force, she was certain. It had convinced her that she should marry no one else but Jim, and after three years together she had no doubts. Their love was unshakable. And because he loved her, he would take her to supper with Miss Shivers. He wouldn't understand *why* she was so keen to go, but he would see that she was in earnest, and that would be enough . . .

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"By the way, I checked the computer," he told her in front of the destinations board on Paddington Station next Sunday. "We definitely didn't send a card to anyone called Shivers."

"Makes it all the more exciting, doesn't it?" Fran said, squeezing his arm.

Jim was the first man she had trusted. Trust was her top requirement of the opposite sex. It didn't matter that he wasn't particularly tall and that his nose came to a point. He was loyal. And didn't Clint Eastwood have a pointed nose?

She'd learned from her mother's three disastrous marriages to be ultra-wary of men. The first—Fran's father, Harry—had started the rot. He'd died in a train crash just a few days before Fran was born. You'd think he couldn't be blamed for that, but he could. Fran's mother had been admitted to hospital with complications in the eighth month, and Harry, the rat, had found someone else within a week. On the night of the crash he'd been in London with his mistress, buying her expensive clothes. He'd even lied to his pregnant wife, stuck in hospital, about working overtime.

For years Fran's mother had fended off the questions any child asks about a father she has never seen, telling Fran to forget him and love her stepfather instead. Stepfather the First had turned into a violent alcoholic. The divorce had taken nine years to achieve. Stepfather the Second—a Finn called Bengt (Fran called him Bent)—had treated their Wimbledon terraced house as if it were a sauna, insisting on communal baths and parading naked around the place. When Fran was reaching puberty, there were terrible rows because she wanted privacy. Her mother had sided with Bengt until one terrible night when he'd crept into Fran's bedroom and groped her. Bengt walked out of their lives the next day, but, incredibly to Fran, a lot of the blame seemed to be heaped on her, and her relationship with her mother had been damaged forever. At forty-three, her mother, deeply depressed, had taken a fatal overdose.

The hurts and horrors of those years had not disappeared, but marriage to Jim had provided a fresh start. Fran nestled against him in the carriage and he fingered a strand of her dark hair. It was supposed to be an Intercity train, but B.R. were using old rolling-stock for some of the Christmas period and Fran and Jim had this compartment to themselves.

"Did you let this Shivers woman know we're coming?"

She nodded. "I phoned. She's over the moon that I answered. She's going to meet us at the station."

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"What's it all about, then?"

"She didn't say, and I didn't ask."

"You didn't? Why not, for God's sake?"

"It's a mystery trip—a Christmas mystery. I'd rather keep it that way."

"Sometimes, Fran, you leave me speechless."

"Kiss me instead, then."

A whistle blew somewhere and the line of taxis beside the platform appeared to be moving forward. Fran saw no more of the illusion because Jim had put his lips to hers.

Somewhere beyond Westbourne Park Station, they noticed how foggy the late afternoon had become. After days of mild, damp weather, a proper December chill had set in. The heating in the carriage was working only in fits and starts and Fran was beginning to wish she'd worn trousers instead of opting decorously for her corduroy skirt and boots.

"Do you think it's warmer farther up the train?"

"Want me to look?"

Jim slid aside the door. Before starting along the corridor, he joked, "If I'm not back in half an hour, send for Miss Marple."

"No need," said Fran. "I'll find you in the bar and mine's a hot cuppa."

She pressed herself into the warm space Jim had left in the corner and rubbed a spy-hole in the condensation. There wasn't anything to spy. She shivered and wondered if she'd been right to trust her hunch and come on this trip. It was more than a hunch, she told herself. It was intuition.

It wasn't long before she heard the door pulled back. She expected to see Jim, or perhaps the man who checked the tickets. Instead, there was a fellow about her own age, twenty-five, with a pink carrier bag containing something about the size of a box file. "Do you mind?" he asked. "The heating's given up altogether next door."

Fran gave a shrug. "I've got my doubts about the whole carriage."

He took the corner seat by the door and placed the bag beside him. Fran took stock of him rapidly, hoping Jim would soon return. She didn't feel threatened, but she wasn't used to these old-fashioned compartments. She rarely used the trains these days except the tube occasionally.

She decided the young man must have kitted himself in an Oxfam shop. He had a dark-blue car coat, black trousers with flares, and

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crepe-soled ankle boots. Around his neck was one of those striped scarves that college students wore in the sixties, one end slung over his left shoulder. And his thick, dark hair matched the image. Fran guessed he was unemployed. She wondered if he was going to ask her for money.

But he said, "Been up to town for the day?"

"I live there." She added quickly, "With my husband. He'll be back presently."

"I'm married, too," he said, and there was a chink of amusement in his eyes that Fran found reassuring. "I'm up from the country, smelling of wellies and cowdung. Don't care much for London. It's crazy in Bond Street this time of year."

"Bond Street?" repeated Fran. She hadn't got him down as a big spender.

"This once," he explained. "It's special, this Christmas. We're expecting our first, my wife and I."

"Congratulations."

He smiled. A self-conscious smile. "My wife, Pearlie—that's my name for her—Pearlie made all her own maternity clothes, but she's really looking forward to being slim again. She calls herself the frump with a lump. After the baby arrives, I want her to have something glamorous, really special. She deserves it. I've been putting money aside for months. Do you want to see what I got? I found it in Elaine Ducharme."

"I don't know it."

"It's a very posh shop. I found the advert in some fashion magazine." He had already taken the box from the carrier and was unwrapping the pink ribbon.

"You'd better not. It's gift-wrapped."

"Tell me what you think," he insisted, as he raised the lid, parted the tissue, and lifted out the gift for his wife. It was a nightdress, the sort of nightdress, Fran privately reflected, that men misguidedly buy for the women they adore. Pale-blue, in fine silk, styled in the empire line, gathered at the bodice, with masses of lace interwoven with yellow ribbons. Gorgeous to look at and hopelessly impractical to wash and use again. Not even comfortable to sleep in. His wife, she guessed, would wear it once and pack it away with her wedding veil and her love letters.

"It's exquisite."

"I'm glad I showed it to you." He started to replace it clumsily in the box.

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"Let me," said Fran, leaning across to take it from him. The silk was irresistible. "I know she'll love it."

"It's not so much the gift," he said as if he sensed her thoughts. "It's what lies behind it. Pearlie would tell you I'm useless at romantic speeches. You should have seen me blushing in that shop. Frilly knickers on every side. The girls there had a right game with me, holding these nighties against themselves and asking what I thought."

Fran felt privileged. She doubted if Pearlie would ever be told of the gauntlet her young husband had run to acquire the nightdress. She warmed to him. He was fun in a way that Jim couldn't be. Not that she felt disloyal to Jim, but this guy was devoted to his Pearlie, and that made him easy to relax with. She talked to him some more, telling him about the teaching and some of the sweet things the kids had said at the end of term.

"They value you," he said. "They should."

She reddened and said, "It's about time my husband came back." Switching the conversation away from herself, she told the story of the mysterious invitation from Miss Shivers.

"You're doing the right thing," he said. "Believe me, you are."

Suddenly uneasy for no reason she could name, Fran said, "I'd better look for my husband. He said I'd find him in the bar."

"Take care, then."

As she progressed along the corridor, rocked by the speeding train, she debated with herself whether to tell Jim about the young man. It would be difficult without risking upsetting him. Still, there was no cause really.

The next carriage was of the standard Intercity type. Teetering toward her along the center aisle was Jim, bearing two beakers of tea, fortunately capped with lids. He'd queued for ten minutes, he said. And he'd found two spare seats.

They claimed the places and sipped the tea. Fran decided to tell Jim what had happened. "While you were getting these," she began—and then stopped, for the carriage was plunged into darkness.

Often on a long train journey, there are unexplained breaks in the power supply. Normally, Fran wouldn't have been troubled. This time, she had a horrible sense of disaster, a vision of the carriage rearing up, thrusting her sideways. The sides seemed to buckle, shattered glass rained on her, and people were shrieking. Choking fumes. Searing pain in her legs. Dimly, she discerned a pair of legs

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to her right, dressed in dark trousers. Boots with crepe soles. And blood. A pool of blood.

"You've spilt tea all over your skirt!" Jim said.

The lights had come on again, and the carriage was just as it had been. People were reading the evening paper as if nothing at all had occurred. But Fran had crushed the beaker in her hand—no wonder her legs had smarted.

The thickness of the corduroy skirt had prevented her from being badly scalded. She mopped it with a tissue. "I don't know what's wrong with me—I had a nightmare, except that I wasn't asleep. Where are we?"

"We went through Reading twenty minutes ago. I'd say we're almost there. Are you going to be okay?"

Over the public-address system came the announcement that the next station stop would be Didmarsh Halt.

So far as they could tell in the thick mist, they were the only people to leave the train at Didmarsh.

Miss Shivers was in the booking hall, a gaunt-faced, tense woman of about fifty, with cropped silver hair and red-framed glasses. Her hand was cold, but she shook Fran's firmly and lingered before letting it go.

She drove them in an old Maxi Estate to a cottage set back from the road not more than five minutes from the station. Christmas-tree lights were visible through the leaded window. The smell of roast turkey wafted from the door when she opened it. Jim handed across the bottle of wine he had thoughtfully brought.

"We're wondering how you heard of us."

"Yes, I'm sure you are," the woman answered, addressing herself more to Fran than Jim. "My name is Edith. I was your mother's best friend for ten years, but we fell out over a misunderstanding. You see, Fran, I loved your father."

Fran stiffened and turned to Jim. "I don't think we should stay."

"Please," said the woman, and she sounded close to desperation, "we did nothing wrong. I have something on my conscience, but it isn't adultery, whatever you were led to believe."

They consented to stay and eat the meal. Conversation was strained, but the food was superb. And when at last they sat in front of the fire sipping coffee, Edith Shivers explained why she had invited them. "As I said, I loved your father Harry. A crush, we

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called it in those days when it wasn't mutual. He was kind to me, took me out, kissed me sometimes, but that was all. He really loved your mother. Adored her."

"You've got to be kidding," said Fran grimly.

"No, your mother was mistaken. Tragically mistaken. I know what she believed, and nothing I could say or do would shake her. I tried writing, phoning, calling personally. She shut me out of her life completely."

"That much I can accept," said Fran. "She never mentioned you to me."

"Did she never talk about the train crash—the night your father was killed, just down the line from here?"

"Just once. After that it was a closed book. He betrayed her dreadfully. She was pregnant, expecting me. It was traumatic. She hardly ever mentioned my father after that. She didn't even keep a photograph."

Miss Shivers put out her hand and pressed it over Fran's. "My dear, for both their sakes I want you to know the truth. Thirty-seven people died in that crash, twenty-five years ago this very evening. Your mother was shocked to learn that he was on the train, because he'd said nothing whatsoever to her about it. He'd told her he was working late. She read about the crash without supposing for a moment that Harry was one of the dead. When she was given the news, just a day or two before you were born, the grief was worse because he'd lied to her. Then she learned that I'd been a passenger on the same train, as indeed I had, and escaped unhurt. Fran, that was chance—pure chance. I happened to work in the City. My name was published in the press, and your mother saw it and came to a totally wrong conclusion."

"That my father and you—"

"Yes. And that wasn't all. Some days after the accident, Harry's personal effects were returned to her, and in the pocket of his jacket they found a receipt from a Bond Street shop for a nightdress."

"Elaine Ducharme," said Fran in a flat voice.

"You *know*?"

"Yes."

"The shop was very famous. They went out of business in 1969. You see—"

"He'd bought it for her," said Fran, "as a surprise."

Edith Shivers withdrew her hand from Fran's and put it to her mouth. "Then you know about me?"

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"No."

Their hostess drew herself up in her chair. "I must tell you. Quite by chance on that night twenty-five years ago, I saw him getting on the train. I still loved him and he was alone, so I walked along the corridor and joined him. He was carrying a bag containing the nightdress. In the course of the journey he showed it to me, not realizing that it wounded me to see how much he loved her still. He told me how he'd gone into the shop—"

"Yes," said Fran expressionlessly. "And after Reading, the train crashed."

"He was killed instantly. The side of the carriage crushed him. But I was flung clear—bruised, cut in the forehead, but really unhurt. I could see that Harry was dead. Amazingly, the box with the nightdress wasn't damaged." Miss Shivers stared into the fire. "I coveted it. I told myself if I left it, someone would pick it up and steal it. Instead, I did. *I* stole it. And it's been on my conscience ever since."

Fran had listened in a trancelike way, thinking all the time about her meeting in the train.

Miss Shivers was saying, "If you hate me for what I did, I understand. You see, your mother assumed that Harry bought the nightdress for me. Whatever I said to the contrary, she wouldn't have believed me."

"Probably not," said Fran. "What happened to it?"

Miss Shivers got up and crossed the room to a sideboard, opened a drawer, and withdrew a box—the box Fran had handled only an hour or two previously. "I never wore it. It was never meant for me. I want you to have it, Fran. He would have wished that."

Fran's hands trembled as she opened the box and laid aside the tissue. She stroked the silk. She thought of what had happened, how she hadn't for a moment suspected that she had seen a ghost. She refused to think of him as that. She rejoiced in the miracle that she had met her own father, who had died before she was born—met him in the prime of his young life, when he was her own age.

Still holding the box, she got up and kissed Edith Shivers on the forehead. "My parents are at peace now, I'm sure of it. This is a wonderful Christmas present," she said.

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a *NEW* Hon. Con story by

JOYCE PORTER

As promised in the last issue, a holiday story featuring the late Ms. Porter's other irascible sleuth, the Honourable Constance Morrison-Burke. Porter defined the Hon. Con as not being "as big a fool as many people thought her," but one whose accomplishments were undermined by her tactlessness and police short-sightedness, leaving her frustrated enough to contemplate founding "the first ever Ladies' Rugby Football Club in the world."

Hon. Con has featured in five novels, including Rather a Common Sort of Crime, A Meddler and Her Murder, *and* Who the Heck Is Sylvia . . .

BUT ONCE A YEAR . . . THANK GOD!

by JOYCE PORTER

Nobody, with one glittering exception, ever enjoyed the Christmas party which the Totterbridge & District Conservative & Unionist Club traditionally gave every year for the children of its members. The ladies who organised and ran the party naturally hated every minute of it, while the guests (all under the age of ten) invariably professed themselves bored out of their tiny minds by the lousy tea, the lousy entertainment, and the even lousier presents. Only the Honourable Constance Morrison-Burke stood up to be counted when it came to asserting that the kiddies' Christmas party was a simply spiffing "do" and well worth all the trouble and heartbreak.

The Honourable Constance's enthusiasm might ring strange in the ears of those aware of her intense dislike of small children and

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her vehement objection to lavishing on them vast sums of money which might be better spent on comforts for Britain's impoverished aristocracy. The explanation is, however, quite simple: it was only at the Conservative Club's Christmas party that the Honourable Constance got the chance to play Father Christmas, all the Conservative menfolk having chickened out of this particular privilege many years ago.

The Honourable Constance (or the Hon. Con as she was generally known in the small provincial town in which she lived) was famous for always wearing the trousers, literally and figuratively, so that yet another breeches role was in itself no great attraction for her. What did draw her irresistably to the part were those bushy white whiskers. To tell the truth, the Hon. Con rather fancied herself in a moustache and full beard, claiming that it brought out the colour of her eyes, and she spent the fortnight before the party swaggering around her house in Upper Waxwing Drive arrayed in the complete get-up. Her ho-ho-hoing was so exuberant that Miss Jones went down daily with one of her sick headaches. Miss Jones, who also lived in the house in Upper Waxwing Drive, was the Hon. Con's dearest chum, confidante, dogsbody, doormat, better half, and who knows what else besides. It was she who had extracted a solemn promise from the Hon. Con ("see that wet, see that dry, cross my heart and hope to die") that she wouldn't wear her Santa Claus whiskers out in the street, no matter how much breaking in they required.

The Hon. Con was not of course so bedazzled that she overlooked the grimmer side of the picture. Bringing good will and Christmas cheer to a pack of some seventy-five infant savages is no joking matter, and the Hon. Con took every reasonable precaution for her own protection. She would like to have equipped herself with an electric cattle prod or a lion-tamer's whip and a kitchen chair, but she knew the Ladies' Organising Committee would never stand for that so she settled for something less exotic. Like heavy boots with reinforced toe-caps, a pair of cricket pads to protect the old shins, and a small rubber truncheon stuffed down the leg of her red trousers just in case she was obliged to move on to the offensive.

On the day of the party the Hon. Con and Miss Jones set off in good time. This was partly because the Hon. Con, arrayed in full festive rig, had trouble even getting into the Mini, never mind actually driving it, and partly because they had to attend a final briefing

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in the main or Margaret Thatcher Hall of the Conservative Club.

The lady helpers were all somewhat anxious and on edge as they gathered round their leader, Mrs. Rose Johnson, Chairperson of the Ladies' Organising Committee. Mrs. Johnson, however, rattled through the battle orders with an air of quiet confidence which, though completely spurious, did help to steady the troops. Indeed, some of the ladies felt so much better that they even started grumbling about the allocation of duties. Mrs. Johnson sighed. This happened every year, no matter how often she reminded them that all the various jobs were distributed strictly by lot. She knew as well as anybody that some posts were more, well, dangerous than others, but what could she or anybody else do about it? Trying to keep track of what people had done in previous years was simply too complicated, and considerable concessions had already been made in respect of the so-called latrine fatigues. Nowadays only bona fide mothers were stationed in the cloakrooms as, when it came to overexcited kids and the undoing of buttons, a certain deftness had been found essential if disasters were to be avoided.

Taking everything into consideration, Mrs. Johnson felt that everybody should be reasonably satisfied with the arrangements, but it came as no very great surprise that one person in particular wasn't. As the meeting came to an end and the ladies, with exhortations to stand firm and unflinching ringing in their ears, began dispersing to their battle lines, the imposing figure of Lady Fowler could be seen swimming doughtily against the stream. She trapped Mrs. Johnson by the platform.

"God damn and blast it, Rose," she exclaimed—her husband had been knighted for services to the fish-paste and tinned pilchard industry which may account for the forcefulness of her language—"you've bloody well done it again!"

Mrs. Johnson tried, and failed, to move what was obviously going to be a bruising encounter away from the platform on which a dejected group of total strangers was huddled, listening gloomily to every word. "Done what, dear?"

"Given that bloody Lyonelle Lawn bitch the best god-damn job again! That's three bloody years on the trot!"

Mrs. Johnson ruffled unhappily through her sheaf of papers. "The best job, dear? Oh, I'd hardly call being stuck by the fire exit at the end of that draughty old corridor 'the best job', would you?"

"Compared with being stuck for two solid hours in the middle of World War Three," snarled Lady Fowler, "yes, I damned well would!

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Last year I was on serving bloody teas and this year I've copped marshalling the little bastards up to collect their presents—and that's in addition to being on sentry-go out here all the time the entertainment's going on. I suppose you know one of the little sods bit me last time? Why the hell don't I ever get one of these cushy jobs where—with luck—you don't even see a blasted kid from start to finish?"

"The Committee draw the names out of a hat, dear," protested Mrs. Johnson feebly, noting with chagrin that the Hon. Con and that peculiar little woman of hers had moved up and were now avidly eavesdropping on the other side. "It's all absolutely fair and aboveboard."

Lady Fowler blew heavily down her nose. "Damned funny it's always Lyonelle Lawn who comes up smelling of roses!"

Mrs. Johnson bridled. "I hope you are not accusing me of indulging in some kind of favouritism, Felicity!" she snapped. "I can't think why you should imagine that I would do Lyonelle Lawn, of all people, any favours. You know she's definitely got planning permission to build that bungalow at the bottom of their garden, in spite of our objections? It'll ruin our view of the river and knock thousands off the price of our house." Mrs. Johnson gave a bitter laugh. "Lyonelle Lawn is hardly *my* blue-eyed girl."

"Maybe you're over-compensating," suggested Lady Fowler unkindly. "You know, being especially bloody kind to the cow because you hate her so much. Understandable, but damned tough luck on your friends."

"Oh, don't be so ridiculous!" Mrs. Johnson looked round for something or somebody upon which to vent her pent-up irritation. She found it on the platform where those peculiar-looking folk were still hanging aimlessly around. Mrs. Johnson pounced on them with relief. "I say, isn't it about time you people were getting yourselves ready?" she called. "You know—make-up and costumes and things? The kiddies will be here any minute now and we don't want to start running late."

Silently, sullenly, and led, somewhat improbably, by a midget, the group began shuffling off backstage.

Lady Fowler watched them go before awarding herself the last word. "I don't know why we bother hiring outside entertainers, Rose," she observed. "Your pet, Lyonelle Lawn, is supposed to have been an actress of sorts, isn't she? I'm sure she'd be delighted to put on a show for us. Belly dancing, was it? Or striptease? Anyhow,

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something frightfully artistic, I'm sure. I hear they loved her in those ghastly workingmen's clubs up North."

The Hon. Con looked at her watch as Lady Fowler and Mrs. Johnson went somewhat icily their separate ways. "Oh, well, suppose it's time I went and sorted those dratted old presents out."

Miss Jones, who didn't approve of eavesdropping—at least not in such a blatant manner—thought it was more than time. She would like to have chided the Hon. Con for such ill-bred behaviour, but she knew what the answer would be so she saved her breath.

The Hon. Con, being the daughter of a peer of the realm as well as the finest private detective in Totterbridge, was naturally a law unto herself. What in common people like you and me would have been idle curiosity was in her case a serious, in-depth research project into behavioural patterns. Private detectives were by definition great students of human nature and everything was grist to their mill.

Untrammelled by the demands of husband and children, blessed with a considerable independent income and spared even from having to bother with all those time-consuming little domestic chores by the selfless devotion of Miss Jones, the Hon. Con did occasionally find it hard to fill up her day. At first she had thrown herself into charitable work, until the protests from the poor, the sick and the deprived became too vociferous to be ignored. Then she had gone in for sport, demolishing two tennis clubs, wrecking the entire local league for crown green bowling, and implanting the kiss of death on mixed hockey. Her sallies into the world of art fared little better, though the charge that she set back the cause of modern music in Totterbridge by fifty years is exaggerated.

It came, therefore, as a great relief all round (except to the police) when the Hon. Con discovered, almost by chance, that she was a natural private detective. Her progress to the very heights of her chosen profession would have been meteoric had it not been for some petty jealousy on the part of the official forces of law and order, and for the acute shortage of really juicy crimes in the Totterbridge area. Had there been even a modest sufficiency of spy rings, mass murders, kidnapings, and bank robberies to keep her going, you wouldn't have found the Hon. Con pottering around in a blooming old Santa Claus outfit, oh dear me, no! However, there wasn't so she was.

"Were that mangey crew hanging about on the stage really the entertainers?" asked the Hon. Con.

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Miss Jones nodded. Although laying no claims to being either a master private detective or even a student of human nature, Miss Jones always seemed to know what was going on.

"Thought we were going to have a film show this year."

"You have to have the lights out for a film show, dear. Mrs. Johnson felt we just daren't risk it."

"What happened to that conjuror fellow?"

"He refused to come again, dear. After what they did to his rabbit."

The Hon. Con jerked her head in the direction of the stage. "So what are this lot supposed to be doing?"

"They're a kind of mini-circus, dear. You know, clowns and a juggler and a tightrope walker, I think. And that midget, of course."

"No animals?"

"They apparently have a performing dog, dear, but Mrs. Johnson thought we hadn't better tempt fate."

The Hon. Con pondered the situation and pronounced her verdict. "The kids'll eat 'em alive." She looked at her watch again. "You'd better be getting your skates on, Bones. It's only five minutes to D-day."

Miss Jones managed a brave little smile before trotting off to her post. She was on duty by the door which led from the Margaret Thatcher Hall to the corridor in which the two cloakrooms were located. It was her job to ensure that no more children at any one time passed through those portals than the facilities could cope with. It was no sinecure as almost everything seemed to get those Conservative toddlers right in the bladder.

Two o'clock struck like a death knell and the Totterbridge & District Conservative & Unionist Club's annual Christmas party got under way with both bangs and whimpers. Viewed as a whole, this year's effort was better than some but worse than most.

It was unfortunate that the proceedings opened with the professional entertainers. They were not a success and the Hon. Con, tucked away in the manager's office, listened to the howls and catcalls coming from the Margaret Thatcher Hall with gloomy satisfaction. Her predictions were coming true and she could only hope that the little swine would have run out of steam by the time it came to distribute the presents.

The trouble was that the children, reared on a healthy diet of slick TV sex and violence, just couldn't take a real man tossing three colored balls in the air while balancing a plate on his nose. The

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contortionist came on, received several suggestions as to how he might enliven his act, and switched frantically into his fire-eating routine. This did cause a momentary lull but, when it became apparent that he wasn't about to set himself on fire and burn to death, the hostilities were resumed. The midget fared no better, being told by one juvenile wit that he ought to be in a preserving bottle at the Royal College of Surgeons. But it was the lady tightrope walker who really whipped things up. Her appearance was greeted by a hail of shoes, the only offensive weapons that the mites could lay their tiny paws on, thanks to the foresight of the Ladies' Organising Committee who had frisked every child on arrival.

The lady tightrope walker, having been given the bird in better places than Totterbridge and being in any case well insulated from the slings and arrows by gin, would probably have weathered the storm if the midget hadn't tried to come to the rescue. He rushed on stage lugging a large packing case stuffed with cheap animal masks made of paper which he proceeded to fling out at the audience by the handful. It was reminiscent of some ignoble savage attempting to placate his gods, and about as successful.

True, the children ceased baying for the lady tightrope walker's blood but only in order to husband their strength for the furious internecine struggle which now flared up over items so abysmally undesirable that, in calmer times, they wouldn't even have been removed from the cornflakes box.

Mrs. Johnson viewed the melee with resignation and a faint touch of hope that it might die down of its own accord. Only when blood began to flow and some of the smaller children had gone not so much to the wall as halfway through it did she acknowledge that the moment for desperate measures had arrived.

"Plan B, ladies!" she screamed. "Plan B! Quickly, now!"

The ladies took a deep breath, squared their shoulders, clenched their fists, and dived in.

Plan B was simple and consisted only of taking the cheap paper masks away from the little kids and giving them to the big kids, who were going to get them anyhow in the end. It merely speeded up the natural order of things and was justified only by the fact that it worked. Gradually the turmoil quietened. The circus performers had long ago beaten a cowardly retreat and so it was, as ever, to Mrs. Carmichael that Mrs. Johnson turned in her hour of need. Mrs. Carmichael was a pianist with an inexhaustible repertoire of your old favourites and mine, and the touch of a baby elephant. But she

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was used to soothing the savage breast and the children were ready for a change. In a matter of seconds they were gleefully bawling out highly obscene versions to the stream of popular songs which flowed from Mrs. Carmichael's leaden fingers.

Over by her door, Miss Jones put away her smelling salts. Plan B had not involved her, of course. She was required to stick resolutely to her post at all times, but even watching the struggle to save civilisation as we know it had been alarming enough. Now that the community singing was in full swing, more children than ever were hearkening to the calls of Nature and Miss Jones had her hands full regulating the flow. Some of the tougher kids predictably began trying to buck the system but fortunately tea was announced before that appalling blond-haired boy—son of the town's leading Baptist minister—got a chance to demonstrate whether or not he was man enough to carry out the threats he'd been uttering in respect of Miss Jones's virtue.

For tea the children were herded into the adjoining Sir Winston Churchill Salon where a veritable feast had been laid out for them. Almost before the last child had been seated the walls were thick with jelly and trifle, and the sausage rolls were zooming through the air like missiles in an interplanetary war. Even the gorgeous cream cakes were deemed too good to eat and were squashed flat instead upon the heads of unsuspecting neighbours.

For the twenty minutes allotted to the pleasures of the table, Mrs. Johnson and her cohorts battled to maintain some semblance of order, but their task was made even more difficult by the animal masks that some of the children were still wearing. The masks hindered one of the most effective ploys for riot control—that of actually recognising a youngster, addressing it by name and threatening to report its unspeakable behaviour to its parents. Not that these brats gave a damn for their parents, but the experience of being publicly identified did seem to unnerve them for a moment or two.

When the tea party was over, it was time for the Hon. Con to hog the limelight. The children were driven back into the Margaret Thatcher Hall and grouped around the platform which, by means of some old army blankets and a few strips of silver paper, had now been transformed into a magic cave. In the middle, surrounded by heaps of exciting-looking parcels, sat the Hon. Con, beaming benevolently and not relaxing her guard for one second.

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At the side of the platform, Mrs. Johnson read the names out from her list in alphabetical order. Each child then, theoretically, came forward in turn, shook hands with Father Christmas, received its present, and said thank you for it. In practice, any child that could break through the protective barrier of lady helpers made a dive and grabbed what it could.

Personation was rife.

"Here," demanded the Hon. Con of a rather rotund frog in striped trousers and bovver boots whom, she could swear, she'd seen twice already before, "you sure you're little Gwendoline Roberts, aged six?"

"You sure you're Father Christmas, missus?" retorted the frog, tearing the parcel wrapped in pink paper out of the Hon. Con's hands. "And not some nosy old judy called Burke?"

A sweet little girl in pigtails ducked back through the phalanx of lady helpers and thrust the battered remnants of her present into the Hon. Con's hands. "I don't want no lousy farmyard animals!" she shrilled, her blue eyes flashing. " 'Sides, they're all broke. Haven't you got a knuckle duster or a horse whip or something?"

The Hon. Con tried, but failed, to give back as good as she got. All around her the Margaret Thatcher Hall was knee-deep in discarded wrapping paper, crushed cardboard boxes and broken toys—all watered by infantile tears of rage and disappointment.

Still, all good things come to an end and four o'clock struck. Mrs. Johnson and her gallant band girded up their loins for one final effort and at five past four Lady Fowler proclaimed the glad tidings in stentorian tones.

"All right, girls!" she roared. "You can relax! I counted seventy-three of the little buggers in and seventy-three of them out! They've gone. It's over for another bloody year!"

The news ran round like wildfire and most of the ladies dropped where they stood. Oh, the blessed peace and quiet! Shoes were slipped off, clothing loosened, and foreheads dabbed with eau-de-cologne. But the human frame is amazingly resilient and before too long everybody was gathering in the kitchens for a cup of tea which, it was hoped, would give them enough strength to go home. Those ladies who had given up smoking cadged cigarettes off their less strong-willed sisters and before long the air was thick with tobacco smoke and recriminations.

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Everybody had her complaints, but none was more vociferous than Mrs. Hinchliffe. "Somebody," she announced, trying to ease her aching back, "is going to have to do something about that cloakroom duty. It's too much."

"We did give you those fresh air sprays, dear," Mrs. Johnson reminded her.

"It's not the pong, Rose, it's the sheer hard work. Two people aren't enough. We need at least three."

"Hear, hear!" agreed the other ladies who had been relentlessly dressing and undressing children all afternoon.

Mrs. Johnson sighed. "There isn't room for three, dear. You yourself said that."

"Two on and one off!" declared Mrs. Hinchliffe. "So we can at least take a bit of a breather. Do you realise neither Clarice nor I so much as got our noses out of that damned boys' loo all afternoon?"

"Irene and I were just the same with the girls," chimed in one of her equally aggrieved colleagues. "I'd thought one of us would be able to take a break while the other held the fort, but no such luck. We were both of us slogging away the whole time."

"We'll look into it next time," promised Mrs. Johnson blandly. "Now," she looked round brightly, "is everybody here?" It was getting time for her little speech of thanks and appreciation.

The Hon. Con was reaching for the sugar bowl. "All present and correct, old fruit! I say," she addressed the company at large, "anybody see a pork pie lying around that hasn't actually been violated? I'm feeling dashed peckish."

Miss Jones, one of whose duties was to keep the Hon. Con's waistline within bounds, endeavoured to divert the conversation from the topic of food. "Actually, Mrs. Johnson," she twittered helpfully, "I don't think we are quite all gathered together yet, are we? There's Mrs. Lawn, for example."

"Oh, she'll have sneaked off hours ago," said Lady Fowler with her usual snort. "Bloody idle cow!"

Mrs. Johnson, who'd had enough of Lady Fowler for one afternoon, pretended not to have heard and, since she had Miss Jones there, she decided she might as well make use of her. "I wonder, Miss —er . . . would you mind just popping along and seeing what's happened to her? Remind her that we're all waiting, would you? Perhaps her watch has stopped."

"Why not just leave her there to bloody rot?" enquired Lady Fowler charitably. "Serve her damned well right if she gets locked in."

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But Miss Jones was already scurrying away. After long association with the Hon. Con, it was not in her nature to question orders, however dog-tired she might be.

In a remarkably short space of time she came scurrying back, ashen-faced and trembling like a leaf.

Even the Hon. Con noticed that she wasn't quite herself. "Something up, Bones?" she asked, pausing with her second vol-au-vent of the afternoon halfway to her lips.

Miss Jones had worked out how she was going to break the news. "Mrs. Lawn is sitting on her chair by the fire exit, dear," she said with chilling composure, "quite dead and with a large knife sticking out of her chest."

"Holy cats!" breathed the Hon. Con. She tossed the unconsumed portion of the vol-au-vent heedlessly aside and leaped to her feet. "Nobody move!" she bawled. "This sounds like murder, and I don't want you lot trampling all over the clues. Everybody stay here while I go and have a look!"

"Hadn't we better phone the police, Constance?"

There's always some clever devil, isn't there? Luckily, the Hon. Con's thought processes were now rattling along at the speed of light. "Better let me check first, old bean," she advised solemnly. "It may be a false alarm."

"It's no false alarm, dear," moaned Miss Jones, her handkerchief pressed to her lips. "She is quite, quite dead, I do—"

The Hon. Con regarded her chum with exasperation. "Do button it, Bones!" she growled.

Still in her Father Christmas outfit, the Hon. Con strode off masterfully towards the scene of the crime. Chin up, stomach in, white whiskers fluttering importantly in the breeze of her passage, she thudded across the Margaret Thatcher Hall, through the door by which Miss Jones had stood on duty all afternoon, down the corridor past the two cloakrooms (one on either side), round the corner at the end and—

"Golly!" said the Hon. Con.

Lyonelle Lawn was certainly as dead as a doornail.

The Hon. Con leaned forward for a close look. The knife sticking out of Lyonelle Lawn's chest seemed ordinary enough. Sort of kitchen knife you could get anywhere. Fingerprints? Grudgingly the Hon. Con acknowledged that that was one she'd have to leave to the boys in blue. Not much blood and it didn't seem as though

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she'd put up much of a fight. Taken unawares, perhaps? And robbery wasn't the motive because there was her handbag, still standing on the floor under her chair.

The Hon. Con straightened up. Bit creepy down there, actually, right at the end of the corridor and with nobody about. She turned her attention to the emergency door which Lyonelle Lawn had been guarding against anyone trying to break in or break out. They had experienced both gate-crashers and escapees in previous years. No, the door was still securely fastened. And there were no windows or—

Somebody was tiptoeing down the corridor!

The Hon. Con's hand closed round the rubber truncheon as she prepared to sell her life dearly.

"Blimey-O'Riley, Bones, I do wish you'd stop pussyfooting about!" Sheer relief that it wasn't a maniac killer with slavering jaws made the Hon. Con's tones unnecessarily sharp.

"I'm sorry, dear, but I thought you'd like to know that Lady Fowler went to phone the police."

"She-Judas!" spat the Hon. Con. "She might have given me a few minutes. I haven't had a decent murder for months."

"Well, you're all right for the moment, dear, because somebody's disconnected the telephone and jammed up all the doors so that we can't get out. Miss Kingston thinks it's super-glue in the locks."

The Hon. Con frowned. This was getting serious. "The murderer, eh?" she mused aloud.

"More likely the children, dear," said Miss Jones with a sigh. She'd always been so fond of kiddies—before she'd been enrolled as a helper at the Totterbridge & District Conservative & Unionist Club's annual Christmas party, of course. "I left them trying to push little Mrs. Bellamy through the skylight over the front door. If she doesn't break a leg or anything, she's going to ring the police from the call box on the corner." Miss Jones glanced involuntarily at the corpse and regretted, not for the first time, that dear Constance hadn't managed to find a nicer hobby. Still, Miss Jones always felt it was up to her to take an intelligent interest. "Have you worked out any theories yet, dear?"

The Hon. Con emitted a rich chuckle. "Dozens, old girl! How does Felicity Fowler grab you, for a start?"

"Oh, Constance!"

"She was being deuced catty about Lyonelle Lawn earlier on," grunted the Hon. Con, ever ready to take any hasty word for the

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foulest deed. "Vicious, really. Or there's Rose Johnson."

"Mrs. Johnson is Chairperson of the Organising Committee, dear!"

"So who was in a better position to set the whole thing up? Who was it who stuck La Lawn down here all on her lonesome where she could be knocked off without anybody noticing? La Lawn's job this afternoon was precisely what Felicity Fowler was griping about, wasn't it? Well, come on, Bones, you heard her."

"Yes, I did hear her, dear," said Miss Jones with dignity, "and I think it highly improbable that Mrs. Johnson deliberately murdered Mrs. Lawn just because the extension to Mrs. Lawn's house was going to ruin Mrs. Johnson's view of the river."

The Hon. Con scowled. "People can get jolly steamed up about that sort of thing. And then there's the depreciation in the value of the Johnsons' house. Don't forget that."

But Miss Jones was determined to take a more socially acceptable line. "Surely it's the work of an outsider, isn't it, dear? A burglar or a tramp or some sort of gibbering maniac who just happened to be passing?"

" 'Fraid that rabbit won't run, old girl," said the Hon. Con with evident relish. "No outsider could infiltrate this blooming building—you know that. We've had every door manned all afternoon to keep gatecrashers out and our dratted brats in. Nor," the Hon. Con raised a lordly hand before Miss Jones could voice the theory that the killer might have concealed himself in the Club earlier on, "is it any good you thinking of that door where Lyonelle Lawn was sitting. That's a proper emergency exit, you see. You can only open or close it from the inside with that bar thing. Well, the late lamented might possibly have opened it up and let her murderer in, but she jolly well didn't close it behind him after he'd gone out. No, we've just got to face facts, Bones. It was one of us. And my money's on Rose Johnson—with Felicity Fowler a good each-way bet."

Miss Jones was reluctant to be the hand that threw the spanner, but she had no choice. "I'm afraid it can't be one of us, dear."

"Why not?"

"There are only two ways of reaching the spot where Mrs. Lawn was killed, dear. You have demonstrated that we can forget about the emergency door. Well, that only leaves the route from the Margaret Thatcher Hall, along the corridor past the cloakrooms."

"So?"

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"I was on duty on the door from the Margaret Thatcher Hall, dear, all afternoon, without a second's break. After Mrs. Lawn and the four ladies on duty in the cloakrooms went through, nobody else did—apart from the kiddies, of course."

The Hon. Con didn't look best pleased. "You prepared to swear that on a stack of Bibles, Bones?"

Miss Jones shuddered. "I should hope that wouldn't be necessary, Constance, dear," she said reproachfully.

"All right," said the Hon. Con, whose thought processes under pressure frequently achieved the velocity of light, "somebody sneaked through after the party was over and you'd gone to the kitchen for a cup of tea."

Miss Jones was no slouch when it came to spiking the Hon. Con's guns. "I was the last person to arrive in the kitchen, dear. Or almost the last. Certainly both Mrs. Johnson and Lady Fowler were already there. Besides, if poor Mrs. Lawn was killed after I left my post by the door, that would mean she had only died a matter of moments before I found her." Miss Jones swallowed hard as she recalled the scene. "I don't think that was the case, dear. The blood seemed to be quite—"

The Hon. Con was growing impatient. "Then it was one of the four lassies on duty in the cloakrooms. One of them could have sloped off any old time, nipped round the corner, stuck the knife in La Lawn, and Bob's your uncle!"

Miss Jones's head was already shaking. "But you heard them yourself, dear, complaining that they'd never had a moment's relaxation and that they never left their cloakrooms all afternoon. They'll be able to give each other alibis, won't they? I mean, each couple will be able to—"

If there was anything that got right up the Hon. Con's nose it was hearing blessed amateurs using technical terms like "alibi". "There's such a thing as collusion!" she snapped. "Or conspiracy! Two of 'em could be in it together."

"Now don't be silly, dear!"

Miss Jones's reproof was feather-light and her smile indulgent, but the Hon. Con was never one to take criticism lying down. "Hope you're in the clear, Bones," she said nastily. "Because, if anybody could have slipped away during the afternoon and done Lyonelle Lawn in, it was *you!*"

The idea was so absurd that Miss Jones even managed a little laugh, though with a fresh corpse only a few feet away laughter was neither very easy nor appropriate.

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"Then it's one of the kids," said the Hon. Con indifferently, as though Miss Jones was in some way to blame for this conclusion. "It's the only answer—and it's not beyond the bounds of possibility, is it? I wouldn't put anything past those evil-minded little horrors. Do you know, I didn't get a thank you out of more than a couple of 'em all afternoon? Talk about manners! Yes, one of 'em could have come out to the cloakroom and popped round here to kill Lyonelle as easy as pie, having first nicked a knife at teatime, I shouldn't wonder. That explains why she didn't put up a struggle or anything. I mean, who expects getting knocked off by a nine-year-old, eh?"

Miss Jones had had a pretty gruelling day so far, what with the children's party and finding a dead body and everything, but it was all as nothing compared with the crisis she now faced. She would like to have fainted, but she daren't. Oh, why, oh, why hadn't she just let dear Constance pin the murder on whomever it was she wanted to pin it on in the first place? There would have been a little unpleasantness, no doubt, but it would be as nothing to the storm of fury and outrage that was going to erupt when the Hon. Con started pointing the finger of suspicion at a group of innocent children and innocent *Conservative* children, at that. Even Labor-voting parents would have been horrified, but the parents of this lot—well, running amuck and foaming at the mouth would just be for starters. Miss Jones's mind shied at the possibilities: tarring and feathering? Being ridden out of Totterbridge on a rail? Lynching?

Miss Jones moistened arid lips. "Constance, dear—"

"You know my methods, Bones," said the Hon. Con grandly. "When you've eliminated the impossible, what you've got left is it—however improbable. And you're the one," she added, turning the knife, "who did most of the eliminating for me."

"Constance, dear, you can't go around making wild accusations against some poor child who—"

"I know that, Bones! Drat it all, I haven't had more than five minutes to get to the bottom of things, have I? I shall have to leave it to the cops to tie up a few loose ends and pinpoint the actual murderous little thug who did it. I am well used," the Hon. Con laughed bitterly, "to having my case snatched out of my hands by so-called professionals the minute I've cracked it. I gave up expecting any credit for my achievements a long time ago."

"In that case, dear," suggested Miss Jones with a cunning born of panic, "why not leave the whole thing to the police? Let them solve it themselves. Why should you help them? They never help you."

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The Hon. Con thought a minute and then drew herself up proudly. She made a striking figure in her red Father Christmas suit and her flowing white whiskers. "Not in my nature to be a dog in the manger, Bones," she said modestly. "Now, while we're waiting, why don't you improve the shining hour by making a list for the cops of all the kids who went past you this afternoon on their way to the cloakrooms? Better stick 'em in chronological order with an indication of the times where you can."

"A list, dear?" bleated Miss Jones. "How can I possibly make a list? Every child at the party went out to the toilets at some time in the afternoon, and most of them more than once. You know what a shambles it was. Besides, I don't know more than a handful of them by name. How could I?"

The Hon. Con shrugged a pair of shoulders which would have looked better in the front row of a rugby scrum. "Hope the cops don't think you're trying to obstruct the course of justice," she rumbled with sham concern. " 'Praps they'll try and make you do it with photographs. You know, one of each kid so you can shuffle 'em around like a pack of cards till you get 'em in the right order."

"But, Constance," wailed Miss Jones, ever prey to her own sense of inadequacy, "half the time I didn't even see the children's faces! They were wearing those stupid animal masks. You can vouch for that, dear. Those who'd got them wore them the entire afternoon and—"

But the Hon. Con was no longer listening. Her somewhat protuberant eyes glazed over as they always did when sheer, undiluted inspiration was about to strike. "Golly!" she breathed in an awed voice. "I've got it! I've blooming well got it!"

"Got what, dear?"

"The solution, Bones! I know who done it!"

"Again, dear?" The words were unworthy, and Miss Jones was ashamed of herself for uttering them.

Luckily the Hon. Con was still up there on Cloud Nine. "It stands out a mile. It was that dwarf!"

"Dwarf, dear?"

"That midget who was with the circus entertainers. Oh, come on, Bones, rattle the old brain-box! You can't have forgotten that crummy bunch."

"I haven't forgotten, dear," said Miss Jones, who could sometimes turn the other cheek almost audibly. "It's just that—"

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"He put on an animal mask and walked right past you," explained the Hon. Con jubilantly. "Twice. Both ways. Coming and going. You just took him for one of the kids and didn't give him a second thought. Deuced cunning, eh? And he was the one who dished out the animal masks in the first place, wasn't he? You all thought he'd gone potty, but it was part of his sinister plan. Premeditated, see!"

Miss Jones took one of her deep breaths. "Constance, dear—"

"Now don't start nitpicking, Bones! Because it all fits. He knew where Lyonelle Lawn was going to be on duty and that she would be tucked away all on her own because he overheard Rose Johnson and Felicity Fowler having an argy-bargy about it. Remember? He and the rest of that grotty crew were standing there lapping up every word—and there can't be many Lyonelle Lawns kicking around, can there? Oh, *heck!*" The Hon. Con's lynx-like ears had caught the distant wail of a police siren. Little Mrs. Bellamy must have made it to the phone box in spite of some fervent prayers to the contrary. "Listen, Bones, are those circus people still in the Club?"

"Oh, I shouldn't think so, dear. They must have gone ages ago. You could check with Miss Simpson. She was on the front door and would have let them out."

"Curses!" The Hon. Con had been picturing herself tossing the miniature miscreant bodily into the arms of the Totterbridge Constabulary. That would have caused a few astounded jaws to drop, all rightie!

Miss Jones's mind meanwhile had been running on more mundane lines—such as slander and criminal libel and the bearing of false witness and what sort of damages a court might award to an outraged and injured midget against the rambunctious and wealthy daughter of a peer. Dear Constance never appeared to her best advantage in a court of law. She would keep telling the judge how to run the case and— "Constance, dear!"

The Hon. Con hitched up her Father Christmas trousers impatiently. "What now?"

Miss Jones put it as simply as she could. "Why should this midget have killed poor Mrs. Lawn?"

"Good grief, Bones, detectives don't have to prove motive. Thought everybody knew that. All you need do is establish means and opportunity. Well, that's what I've done. And I'll bet he nicked the knife from the kitchens here."

"But he must have had some reason, dear."

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"The stage!" The Hon. Con's imagination always worked best under pressure. "Lyonelle Lawn used to be on the stage, didn't she? Well, so's that midget. They probably met up somewhere. You know what theatricals are like—all nerves and tension and things. There'd be a feud, I expect, or maybe she spurned his lascivious advances, or—"

But the time for leisurely speculation was past. Masculine voices and the tramp of heavy feet could be heard coming from the direction of the Margaret Thatcher Hall. The Hon. Con prepared herself for the encounter, smoothing down her scarlet tunic and fluffing up her white whiskers. "It's all a question of psychology, really," she whispered in an attempt to allay her chum's only too evident distress. "I'm deliberately leaving this motive question for the police to solve for the sake of their morale. You follow me? It'll give them the chance to make a contribution and earn a bit of kudos—and it'll stop 'em getting too shirty over the indisputable fact that I've unravelled the mystery and tied the whole blooming case up for 'em before they even got here."

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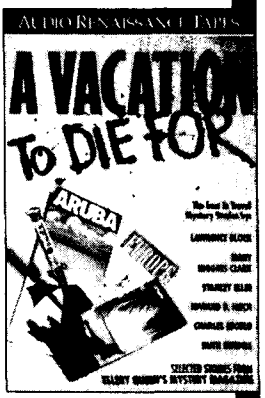

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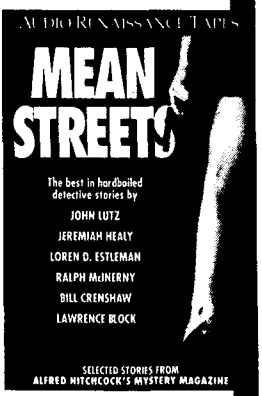

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The thirteenth and final winner of Ellery Queen's world-wide contest was Cornell Woolrich for his memorable example of the contemporary "inverted detective story." The first two-thirds of the story deals with the crime—and the events leading up to it; the last one-third deals with the detection—and how the detective proved it. The format is undoubtedly familiar to anyone who has ever viewed an episode of Columbo. *The difference here is that both the detective and the criminal are nameless, anonymous entities and, as Ellery Queen suggested in his original introduction to this story, Mr. Woolrich may intend the murderer to be Everyman. Or is it the murderer's nemesis, the detective, who is Everyman . . . ?*

ONE DROP OF BLOOD

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

I. THE CRIME—AND THE EVENTS LEADING UP TO IT

He didn't premeditate it, and yet, he told himself afterward, it all turned out better than if he had. Much better. He might have done all the wrong things, he told himself. Picked the wrong place, the wrong time, the wrong weapon. Too much careful planning ahead might have made him nervous, as it had many another. In the effort to remember *not* to forget something, he might have forgotten *something else.* How often that had happened!

This way, there was nothing to forget—because there had been nothing to remember in the first place. He just walked through the whole thing "cold," for the first time, without having had any rehearsal. And everything just seemed to fall into place—the right place, by itself. These hair-split timetables are very hard to stick to.

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Impromptu, the way he did it, the time element doesn't become important. You can't trip over a loose thirty seconds and fall flat on your face when there aren't a loose thirty seconds to trip over.

The situation itself was old and trite. One of the oldest, one of the tritest. Not to him, of course, and not to her—it never is to those involved. It's always new, first-time new.

To begin with, he was single and had no troubles whatsoever to deal with. He had a car, he had a job, he had health, and he had good looks. But mainly, he had freedom. If he came home at ten o'clock or if he came at two, if he had one drink or if he had a few, there was no one but himself to keep score.

He was the personification of the male spirit, that restless roving spirit that can only get into trouble because it didn't have any trouble to start with, that had no other way to go but—from lack of trouble into a mess of trouble.

And so we find him one star-spiked May evening, in a $95 suit, with $75 in his wallet, with a new convertible waiting outside to take him in any direction he wanted to go, and with a girl named Corinne in his arms—a very pretty Corinne too, dexterously dancing and spinning around together, breaking apart, coming together again, and above all (a favorite step of theirs) making an overhead loop of their two hands so that she could walk through it, turn, then go back through it again. All in excellent time and in excellent rhythm to the tune of *The Night They Invented Champagne,* played by an excellent band.

Beautiful to watch, but what a fatal dance that was, because—it was their first together. They should have turned and fled from each other in opposite directions.

Instead they went out to the car. She patted it admiringly as he beamed, proudly possessive as only a young male car-owner can be. Then they drove to where she lived, sat a while and watched the stars, and kissed and kissed, and watched the stars . . . and that was it.

Another night, another dance, same car, same stars, same kisses—or same lips, anyway. She got out to go in. He got out to keep her from going in. Then they both got in the car again and went to a motel . . . And that was it again.

After some time had gone by she asked him about marriage. But she didn't get much of an answer. He liked it the way it was. She hadn't asked him soon enough, or in the right order of things. So, afraid that she would lose him altogether, and preferring to have

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him this way rather than no way at all, she didn't ask him again.

It was a peaceful, comfortable existence. It was definitely not sordid—she was not a sordid girl. She was no different, in effect, from any other girl on her street who had stepped out and married. Only she had stepped out and not married. He was the first man she had ever loved, and it stopped there. The only thing was, she had left freedom of action, freedom of choice, entirely in his hands—which was a tactical error of the worst sort in the never-ending war between the sexes. She was a very poor soldier, for a woman. They were not actually living together. They were keeping company, one might say, on a permanent basis.

At any rate, one night when he called to take her out, she complained of not feeling well. In fact, it was easy to see she wasn't shamming, and noticing that she was alternately shivering and burning up he sent for a doctor and remained there while the doctor examined her. (She spoke of him as her fiancé whenever it became necessary in front of a third person.) It was nothing serious—merely an attack of the flu, but she had to go to bed.

He would not—to give him some credit—have walked out on her then and there; but she was feeling so miserable that for her part she wished he would leave her alone. So, noticing this, he kissed her—a mere peck—and left.

His original intention—at least, from the door to the car—was to go to his own apartment and make the best of an unexpected solitary evening. But the stars were at their dirty work again, and his wristwatch didn't help either (9:48); he was 28 and *didn't* have the flu, so—

Her name was Allie.

And she wasn't going to be like Corinne—he found that out right from the start. She could enjoy the stars, sure, and she could kiss, sure, but she'd take up both those occupations on his time, as his officially credited fiancé or his lawfully wedded wife—not on her own time, as a freelance, if you get the distinction.

And her sense of timing was much better, too. He came out three or four kisses short the first meeting. So he wanted to see her again, to try to make up the shortage. But she always knew just when to stop. He was still a couple short the second meeting, so that made him want to see her a third time. By then he was so hopelessly in hock to her that his only chance of clearing up the debt was to marry her, and try to work it out on a lifetime payment plan.

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She was a five-star general in the battle of the sexes. And it must have been inborn, because she'd never heard a shot fired until she met him.

At first he managed to sandwich the two of them in together. He saw Allie a couple of nights a week, saw Corinne a couple of others. In fact, he would have liked to continue his three-way-stretch arrangement indefinitely; the difficulty, however, lay not with them but with himself. Soon more and more nights with Corinne reminded him of the night she'd had the flu: the stars above and the wristwatch were there, but not Corinne's stars anymore and not Corinne's time. A waste of Allie's time, instead.

Finally there were no more nights with Corinne—just one last station break and the program went off the air.

"You've lost interest in me. I'm not blind. I've noticed it for some time now."

"That's the chance you have to take," he told her, "when you're in love."

"But why did it happen to you," she wanted to know, "and not to me? Shouldn't we both come out even?"

"You don't come out even in love," he told her. "Someone always has to come out behind." And then he added, "I'll call you up some night." Which is the way some men say goodbye to a woman.

She'll find somebody else, he thought; she was easy for me, she'll be easy for the next one. And he shrugged her off.

But there are three things in this world you can't shrug off: death, taxes—and a girl who loves you.

Now they were in the homestretch, Allie and he. Now when they looped their hands above their heads on the dance floor, her engagement diamond blazed toward the lights, proclaiming, "This is mine. Hands off." Not to jewel thieves, but to stealers of men.

Now all the tribal customs were brought to bear—everything the world insists shall surround the lawful mating of a man and a woman. The meetings with the relatives from far-off places; the luncheons, dinners, parties, showers; the choosing of a trousseau; the finding of their first home; even the purchase of the furniture that was to go into it.

Now the date was set, the license applied for, the church reserved, the flowers and the caterers and the champagne arranged for. Now even the blood tests were taken, and they were both declared pure. All that remained was the marrying and the honeymoon.

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Now the boys got together and gave him his bachelor party, his last night to howl. And the howls were something to hear. Three separate times around town they were arrested *en masse,* and twice the arresting officers not only released them but even accompanied them for a short part of the way, and the third time wished them well and urged them only to "keep it down, boys." Then finally the last two survivors, the diehards whose pledge had been to see him safely home, had him at his door, and after much fumbling with keys, and draping of arms across shoulders, and swaying and tottering, they thrust him inside, closed the door, and left him.

And suddenly he was sober, stone-cold, ice-cold sober, and the whole party had been a waste of liquor—at least, for him.

Corinne was sitting there. Waiting for him.

"You took so long to get back," she complained mildly. "I knew you still lived here, but I thought you'd never get back."

"Had a little party," he said. He was starkly sober, but his tongue hadn't yet quite caught up with the rest of him. A warning bell started ringing: I wonder if she knows, I wonder if she knows.

"I'm not criticizing," she went on. "You're free to go out with your pals—free every night in the week. It's only natural, so what's the harm?"

The warning bell stopped suddenly. There was silence. She doesn't know, he told himself, *and she's not going to know from me.*

Business of fooling around with a cigarette, so he'd use up time and wouldn't have to say too much to her. Maybe she'd go away.

"I know it's late," she said.

He looked at the wristwatch that had played such a double-crossing part in their little story. Meaning, it is late.

She doesn't want to start over again, does she? For Pete's sake, not that! Love is a one-way street.

"Aren't you working?" he asked. "Don't you have to get up early in the morning?"

"I haven't been working since last week," she said. Then, understandingly, "You're tired; I know."

"Aren't you?"

"Yes, but I do have to talk to you about something. I've got to. It's very important."

Now he knew, more or less. There were only two things a girl could possibly want from a man, in all the world, in all this life: love or money. And since love was out, that left only money. Another

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thing told him: she was much too tractable, noticeably taking pains not to antagonize or ruffle him in any way.

"Won't it keep till tomorrow?" he said by way of acquiescence. "I'm beat. Completely beat. I'll come over to see you tomorrow."

"But will you?" she asked, frowning, but still with that air of not wanting to push him, not wanting to crowd him.

"Aw, for the love of Mike, Cor," he said impatiently, "when did you ever know me to break my word to you?"

It was true. He never had—not in the little things.

She had to accept that—it was the best she could get.

"I've moved since the last time I saw you," she said, and gave him the new address.

"All right, I'll be there, Allie," he promised. He was almost nudging the door inch by inch right in her face, anxious to get rid of her.

For a moment he lost an inch or two. "Allie?" she said. "Who's Allie?"

"That's Al," he said quickly. "Fellow I go around with—with him tonight. I'm so used to saying his name every five minutes or so."

He finally got the door shut and went "Whew!" from the shoelaces up. Money, he said, that's all it is—she wants money. That hint about not working. All right, I'll give her some. Wind the thing up that way. She was entitled to something after all, he supposed.

He took five hundred out of his savings account the next day, during his lunch hour. The nick it made wasn't too bad. There was still plenty to cover the honeymoon expenses and the first few months of married life. And he was making a good salary.

Then right in front of the bank, coming out, he met Dunc, Allie's brother. Dunc glanced up at the bank facade, then at him, and said, "Look, if you could use a little extra—I know how it is at a time like this, I went through the mill myself three years ago."

Bing! another two hundred and fifty from Dunc, smack in his palm. His face didn't even change color. After all, they were both going to be in the same family, weren't they?

First, he thought, I'll put two fifty of my own back. Then he thought, why be a rat—let her have it all, it's only money. So she was coming out pretty good for a last year's leftover crush; she had no kick coming. She'll fall all over my neck, he thought complacently. But no fooling around tonight; I'm going to unwind her arms and give them back to her.

The bungalow was way out at the end of nowhere—dim in the growing darkness. Even the road in front of it wasn't paved yet, just

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surfaced with some kind of black stuff. But there were going to be other bungalows—he could just make out the skeleton frames of some of them already starting up in a straight line past hers, getting thinner as they went along, until there were only foundations, then just a bulldozer.

She had it fixed up real pretty, the way women like to do, even women with broken hearts. Chintz curtains fluttering out the windows, like vermilion lips coaxing to be kissed.

She didn't even give him a chance to get onto the porch and ring the bell. She was waiting there for him. She had on a little apron to match the curtains. Last year's love, playing house all by herself.

"I wasn't sure you were really coming."

He raised his brows. "Did I ever break my word to you?"

"No," she said. "Not your word. Only—"

She had cocktails frosting in a shaker.

"You used to like martinis best," she said.

"I don't like martinis anymore," he said, and let that sink in.

She traced a finger on the frosting of the shaker and made a little track, shiny as a mirror. "I've got to talk to you."

"We don't have to," he said. "This talks better than anything. This talks best." He'd taken the money out and laid it down.

"What's that for?" she said, her face suddenly white with shock and insult and hurt.

"Well, if you don't know why, don't ask me."

She sat in a chair for a few moments getting over it—or, it would be more correct to say, getting familiar with it. She had a slow temper. Until this moment, as a matter of fact, he hadn't known she had any temper at all.

Then she got up, and her face was unlike any face he'd ever seen her wear before. She flung the words point-blank at him.

"You don't have to do *this* to me! You don't have to do *this!*"

"Then what else is there?" In all honesty he couldn't understand her outrage. He'd lost her train of thought, and the situation was becoming an irritant.

"What *else* is there? You have to stand by me, that's what else there is! I can't go it alone!"

Now his voice went up, almost into a wail of incomprehension. "Stand by you! What does that mean?"

She took her open hand and slammed it down on the table, so hard that the ice in the shaker went *tlink!* "I'm going to have your baby, that's what that means!"

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The shock was dizzying. He had to reach out and hold onto something for a moment.

"How do I—?"

"There never was another man in my life, that's how you know." And he did know.

"All right," he said.

"All right what?"

"I'll take care of everything. Hospital and—"

Now finally she screamed piercingly at him in her passion and torment, and she wasn't the kind to scream. "Hospital? I don't want a hospital, I want a husband!"

The second shock, on top of the first, completely unbalanced him. The rest was just physical reflex, not mental reaction at all.

She said only one thing more in her life. In her entire life.

"You're going to marry me, do you understand? You're going to *marry* me!"

The object was suddenly in his hand, as though it had jumped into his hand of its own accord. He hadn't seen it before, hadn't even known it was in the room.

She died at almost the very first blow. But he kept striking on and on and on, to the point of frenzy, to the point of mania, to the point of sheer hallucination. And then she was gone, and it was over. And the thing that a hundred other men, a thousand other men, had done, and that he'd thought he'd never do—now he'd done it too. And the thing he'd read about a hundred times, a thousand times, now he wasn't reading about it, he was living it. And he liked it much better the other way.

He looked at the object he was still holding, and he realized he actually didn't know what it was even now. What could have been more unpremeditated than that? Some sort of long curving blade, razor-keen. Then at last he identified it—more by hearsay than by actual recognition. A Samurai sword, souvenir of the long-ago war with Japan. He remembered now she had once mentioned she had a brother who had served in the Pacific theater—only to come back and die in a car crash not long after. Many men had brought these back with them at the time.

He let go, and it dropped with a muffled thud.

After a while he located the bracket she had driven into the wall. It must have been hanging up there. When he went over to it he found, on the floor underneath, the severed cord it had hung by and the empty scabbard. His subconscious mind must have recognized

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it for a weapon, for he had no recollection whatever of snatching it down, and yet he must have, in the blinding red explosion that had burst in his brain and ended in murder.

In the beginning he was very mechanical, as the glaze of shock that coated him all over slowly thawed and loosened. He tipped the cocktail shaker into one of the two glasses and drank. He even ate one of the two olives she'd had ready at the bottoms of the two glasses. Not calloused. His instinct told him he needed it, if he wanted to try to live. And he wanted to try to live very badly. Even more so now that he'd looked at death this close with his own eyes. Then he poured a second one, but let it stand. Then he emptied what remained in the shaker down the sink.

It seemed hopeless. There seemed no place to begin. The room was daubed with her, as though a house painter had taken a bucket of her blood, dipped his paint brush in it, then splashed it this way and that way and every which way all over the walls. He was splattered himself, but fortunately he was wearing a dark suit and it didn't show up much; and that part of the job could wait until later.

The first thing to do was to get her out of here. All the little hers . . . He went to her closet and found a number of opaque plastic garment bags—even more than he needed, in fact . . . and finally he zippered them up securely and let them lean there a moment.

Then he went out to his car, opened the trunk compartment, and made room. He went around to the front seat, got the evening newspaper that he remembered having left there, and papered the entire trunk with it, to prevent any errant stains or smears. It was so incredibly unpeopled out here that he didn't even have to be furtive about it. Just an occasional precautionary look around him.

Then he went in again, brought out the garment bags, put them in the trunk, and locked it. He stepped back into the bungalow to put out the lights, took her key with him so he'd be able to get back in again, got in his car, and drove off.

And as far as that part went, that was all. There was nothing more to it.

He drove steadily for some hours. And strangely enough, at a rather slow pace, almost a desultory glide. He could do that because, again strangely enough, he felt no panic whatever. Even his fear was not acute or urgent. It would be untrue to say that he felt no fear at all; but it was distant and objective, rather than imminent and personal—more on the level of ordinary prudence and caution. And this must have been because it had all come up so suddenly,

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and blown over so suddenly, that his nerves hadn't had time to be subjected to a long, fraying strain. They were the nerves of an almost normal person, not of a man who had just taken another person's life.

He even stopped once, left the car, and bought a fresh pack of cigarettes at a place he saw was still open. He even stayed there for a few moments, parked in front of it, smoking, then finally slithered on again.

At last his driving stopped being directionless, took on purpose, as he finally made up his mind about a destination. There was very little noticeable change in it, and he still didn't hurry. He simply made fewer haphazard turns and roundabouts, and perhaps stepped it up another five miles per hour.

Even with a target, he still continued driving for several more hours. The metropolitan section was now left far behind. On the final lap he was purring steadily along a road that paralleled a railroad right-of-way. An occasional pair of lights would blink past him going the other way. There was nothing for anyone else to see or recall—just a relaxed silhouette behind the wheel, with a red coal near its lips, and tooling by. Although a good, wide road, it was not a main artery of traffic.

More than half the night had now gone by, but he still drove on. This had to be done, and when a thing has to be done, it should be done right, no matter how much time it takes.

At last, as he neared the outskirts of a large-sized town, the railroad tracks broadened into numerous sidings, and these blossomed finally into strings of stagnant freight cars of assorted lengths, some only two or three coupled together, others almost endless chains.

He came to a halt finally by the side of the road, took out a flashlight, and left the car. He disappeared into one of the dark lanes between the freight cars, an occasional soft crunch of gravel the only indication of his movements. He was gone for some time, taking his time in this as in everything else. Almost like a shopper shopping for something that exactly suits him, and refusing to be satisfied with anything else.

When he came back to his car there was very little more to it. He went out to the middle of the road, stood there first looking up one way, then down the other. When he was sure there were no lights approaching even in the remotest distance, he stepped over to his car, moving deftly and quickly but still by no means frightenedly, opened the trunk, and took out the garment bags. He propped them

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for a moment against the car while he took the precaution of closing the trunk, so that it might not attract attention in case anyone should drive by while he was gone.

Then, half supporting and half trailing the garment bags, he disappeared into the lane of his choice between the parallels of freight cars—the one that led to the freight car he had found with its door left unfastened. There was the sound of the slide grating open, then in a few moments the sound of it grating closed again. And that was all.

When he came back to the car he was alone, unburdened.

The drive back was as uneventful as the drive out. If he had been of a cynical nature, he might have been tempted to ask: What's there to a murder? What's there to worry about?

In due course he came back to the point where the route that led out to her bungalow diverged from the route that would eventually bring him to his own apartment. He didn't even hesitate. He took the road home. He was taking a gamble of a sort, and yet it wasn't as great a gamble as it appeared; he felt now that the longer odds were in his favor, and besides, there was nothing more he could do in her bungalow at this time. She had told him she had stopped working. There was a good chance no one would go there to seek her out during the course of the next day or two. And if someone should, there was an even better chance they would not force entry into the bungalow.

So he decided to go home, leave the bloodstained room the way it was for the time being, and not return until after he'd had a chance to make the necessary preparations for cleaning it up.

He set his alarm for nine, and slept the three hours remaining until then. Which is three hours more sleep than the average murderer can usually get on the first night following his crime.

When he awoke it was Saturday morning, and without even breakfasting he went to a paint store completely across town from where he lived and explained to the clerk that his so-and-so of a landlord wouldn't paint for him; so he was going to do the job himself and be damned to him.

The man in the paint store was sympathetic. "What color you want?" he asked.

"What color would you advise?"

"What color is it now?"

He picked it out with positive accuracy on a color chart the man showed him.

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"Well, your best bet to cover that would be either a medium green or a medium brown," the clerk said. "Otherwise the color on now is going to show through and you'd have to give it two coats."

He thought of the color of dried blood and promptly selected the brown—a sort of light cinnamon with a reddish overtone. Then he bought a like shade of glossy paint for the woodwork, a ladder, and the requisite brushes and mixing fluids. Then he went to a clothing store—not a haberdashery but the sort of outlet that sells work clothes—and purchased a pair of overalls, and added a pair of gauntlets so that he wouldn't get any paint under his fingernails. Such a thing could be the devil to pay.

Then he went back to where he'd killed her.

It was only just past mid-morning when he got there. This time he drove off the unpaved roadway, detoured around to the back of the bungalow, and parked directly behind it in such a way that the house itself hid his car.

There was really no need for this precaution. Being Saturday, the neighborhood was empty—no workmen, no residents; but he felt better taking every possible safeguard, even against an unlikely prowler.

Then on foot he circled around to the front and examined the porch before unloading anything from his car. It was just as he had left it. There was every evidence that his gamble had paid off, that no one had come near the bungalow since it had happened. From a remark she had dropped at his place when they were setting up what had turned out to be the murder appointment, he knew she had no telephone. She was on the waiting list but they hadn't got to her yet. From their old days together he remembered she had never been much of a newspaper reader, so it was extremely improbable she would have regular delivery service, especially in this deserted section. As for milk, there were no signs of that either; she must have brought home a carton from the grocery store whenever she needed it. Finally, the mail slot opened directly into the house itself, so there was no way of telling from the outside whether the mail had been picked up by its recipient or not.

There wasn't a single thing that wasn't in his favor. He almost marveled at it himself.

He gave another precautionary look around, then opened up the front door with her key, and went in.

For a moment—and for the first time—his heart almost failed him. It looked even worse than he'd remembered from the night

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before. Maybe he'd been too taken up with removing her to give it due notice. There was only one wall that was completely sterile. Two more were in bad-to-middling shape. But the fourth was practically marbelized, it had such veins and skeins twining all over it. It resembled nothing so much as a great upright slab of white-and-brown marble.

He could see what had caused the marbelized effect. It wasn't that the blood had spurted of its own accord: it was the strokes of the Samurai sword that had splashed it like that—all over everything.

It was too big a job; he felt he could never swing it.

And then he reminded himself: you got rid of her body, didn't you? If you did that, you can do this too.

He then did another of those incongruous things that he kept doing all the way through. He picked up the shaker from the night before, got out the gin and the vermouth, and made himself two more martinis. He left out the olives though.

Feeling more confident now, he changed to his work clothes. He even took off his shoes and remained in his socks. Paint spots on shoes could be just as hard to remove and just as incriminating as paint underneath fingernails.

When he began the new paint job he realized that he didn't have to be too finicky about it—they couldn't arrest you just because your painting wasn't up to major league standards. The daubing went as fast as a speed-cop's motorcycle on the way with a ticket. Almost before he knew it, he had all four sides done, including the one that hadn't needed it. This latter he threw in by way of artistic flourish. The room would have looked queer with three walls one color and the fourth another.

The ladder folded, the buckets out of the way, the overalls and gauntlets stripped off, he stood in the center of the room and took a comprehensive look at his handiwork—and drew a deep sigh. Not only of relief, but somewhat of cocksure pride.

It might not have been the best paint job that had ever been done, but it guaranteed one thing: the walls were bloodless; the damning stains were completely covered up.

The furniture, of course, was going to be a different matter. Fortunately, it wasn't outsized, the room itself being fairly small. He rolled up the rug and stood it in a corner, just inside the front door.

This part of the program, he knew, would be less arduous than the walls, but it was also going to be a good deal more risky. It necessitated arson.

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He slipped out and made a tour of inspection of the skeleton bungalows that sprouted past hers, giving the interior of each one a quick glance.

The first three were too close to hers for his purpose—the inference might be a little too easy to draw. The one at the opposite end was nothing but a gouged-out foundation and poured concrete. The next-to-the-last already had its two-by-fours up, but no flooring or roofing. The next one in had enough wooden construction—plus a lot of shavings—to be ideal: it was like starting a fire in an empty lathe-basket.

Three trips were necessary. He carried the rolled rug, the removable cushions from settee and chair, a small end-table, a parchment lampshade, and whatever else had been stained beyond hope of cover-up, to the unfinished bungalow. He didn't forget to include the suit he had worn the night before. He made a pyre of these, topped it off with the paint-impregnated overalls, gauntlets, and brushes, and poured on the highly-inflammable residue from the paint cans.

Then he drained gas from his car, using a receptacle he'd brought from the bungalow, leaving just enough in the tank to get him home, and liberally doused it not only on the mound itself but on the wood around it.

He turned his car around, facing in the direction he was to go, killed the engine, and sat waiting, looking all around him. Finally he started the engine again, very softly, like a newborn kitten purring, picked up a furled newspaper, took a lighter out of his pocket, clicked it twice to make sure it was in working order, got out of the car, leaving the door open in readiness, and went inside the unfinished house.

He came out again at a run—this was the first time since he'd killed her that he moved fast—jumped in the car and started off with a surge. He only closed the door after he was careening along, foot tight to the floor. This part of the operation, if no other, was split-second schedule, and not a stray moment could be spared.

For as long as the place remained in sight behind him he could see no sign of flickering flame, of incipient fire. After that—who was around to care?

He got out in front of his own door, locked the car, tossed his keys jauntily up into air and caught them deftly in the same hand.

Upstairs, he sprawled out in a chair, legs wide apart, and let out a great sigh of completion, of finality.

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"Now let them say I've killed her." Then, sensibly, he amended it to: "Now let them *prove* I killed her."

II. THE DETECTION—AND HOW THEY PROVED IT

They did neither the one nor the other. They started very circumspectly, very offhandedly, in a very minor key—as those things often happen.

A ring at the doorbell.

Two men were standing there.

"Are you—?"

"Yes, I'm—"

"Like to ask you a few questions. Mind if we come in?"

"Come in if you want. I have no objections. Why should I?"

"Do you know a Corinne Matthews?"

"I did at one time."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"What is this—June, isn't it? Either late February or early March. I'm not sure which."

"Not since then?"

"You asked me a minute ago and I told you. If I'd seen her since then, I'd say so."

"Not since then. That's your statement?"

"My statement, right."

"Any objection to coming downtown with us? We'd like to question you in further detail."

"You're the police. When you ask people to come downtown with you, they come downtown with you. No objection."

They came back again that evening. He went down again the next day. Then back again, down again. Then—

Down again for good.

Held on suspicion of murder.

A back room. Many different rooms, but a back room in particular.

"I suppose now you're going to beat the hell out of me."

"No, we're not going to beat the hell out of you—never do. Besides, we're too sure of you; we don't want anything to backfire. Juries are funny sometimes. No, we're going to treat you with kid gloves. In fact, you're even going to wear kid shorts when you squat down in the old Easy Chair."

"Is that what I'm going to do," he asked wryly, "for something I didn't do?"

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"Save it," he was advised. "Save it for when you need it, and you're going to need it plenty."

All through the long weary day identification followed identification.

"Is this the man who bought a pack of cigarettes from you, and handed you in payment a dollar bill with the print of a bloody thumb on one side and the print of a bloody forefinger on the other?"

"That's him. I thought it was an advertising gag at first, the prints were both so clear. Like for one of them horror movies, where they stencil bloody footprints on the sidewalk in front of the theater, to pull the customers inside. I couldn't help looking at him while he was pocketing his change. I didn't call him on it because I could tell the bill wasn't queer, and he acted so natural, so nonchalant. I even saw him sitting out there smoking for a while afterwards. Yes sir, that's him all right!"

"I don't deny it."

"Is this the man who bought a can of Number Two russet-brown paint from you? *And* gloss. *And* brushes. *And* a folding stepladder."

"That's him."

"I don't deny it."

"Is this the man who bought a pair of overalls from you? And a pair of work gloves?"

"That's him."

"I don't deny it."

Room cleared of identifying witnesses.

"Then you took the materials you've just confessed you bought and went to work on the living room at One Eighty-two."

"That I don't admit."

"You deny you repainted that room? Why, it's the identical shade and grade of paint you bought from this paint store!"

"I didn't say I denied it. What I said was, I don't admit it."

"What does that mean?"

"Prove I painted there. Prove I didn't paint somewhere else."

They knew they couldn't. So did he.

"Show us where you painted somewhere else, then."

"No, sir. No, *sir*. That's up to you, not up to me. I didn't say I painted somewhere else. I didn't say I didn't pour it down a sewer. I didn't say I didn't give it away as a present to a friend of mine. I didn't say I didn't leave it standing around some place for a minute and someone stole it from me."

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The two detectives turned their backs on him for a minute. One smote himself on the top of the head and murmured to his companion, "Oh, this man! He's got a pretzel for a tongue."

The plastic garment bags and their hideous contents were finally located. Perhaps all the way across the country in some siding or railroad yard in Duluth or Kansas City or Abilene. They didn't tell him that outright, in so many words, or exactly where, but he could sense it by the subtle turn their questioning took.

They had their *corpus delicti* now, but they still couldn't pin it on him. What was holding them up, what was blocking them, he realized with grim satisfaction, was that they couldn't unearth a single witness who could place him at or near the freight yard he'd driven to that night—or at any other freight yard anywhere else on any other night. The car itself, after exhaustive tests and examinations, must have turned out pasteurizedly pure, antibiotically bloodless. He'd seen to that. And the garment bags had been her own to begin with.

There was nothing to trace him by.

Even the Samurai sword—which he had had the audacity to send right along with her, encased in a pair of her nylon stockings—was worthless to them. It had belonged to her, and even if it hadn't, there was no way of checking on such a thing—as there would have been in the case of a firearm. Being a war souvenir, it was nonregisterable.

Finally, there was the total lack of an alibi. Instead of counting against him it seemed to have intensified the deadlock. From the very beginning he had offered none, laid claim to none, therefore gave them none to break down. He'd simply said he'd gone home and stayed there, and admitted from the start he couldn't prove it. But then they couldn't prove he'd been out to the bungalow either. Result: each canceled the other out. Stand-off. Stalemate.

As if to show that they had reached a point of desperation they finally had recourse, during several of the periods of interrogation, to stronger measures. Not violence: no blows were struck, nothing was done that might leave a mark on him afterward. Nor were any threats or promises made. It was a sort of tacit coercion, one might say. He understood it, they understood it, he understood they did, and they understood he did.

Unsuspectingly he accepted some punishingly salty food they sent out for and gave to him. Pickled or smoked herring. But not water.

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A fire was made in the boiler room and the radiator in one of the basement detention rooms was turned on full blast, even though it was an oppressively hot turn-of-spring-into-summer day. Still no water.

As though this weren't enough, an electric heater was plugged into an outlet and aimed at his straight-backed chair. He was seated in it and compelled to keep two or three heavy blankets bundled around him. In no time the floor around his feet had darkened with the slow seep of his perspiration. But still no water.

Then a tantalizingly frosted glass pitcher, brimming with crystal-clear water and studded with alluring ice cubes, was brought in and set down on a table just within arm's reach.

But each time he reached for it he was asked a question. And while waiting for the answer, the nearest detective would, absently, draw the pitcher away—just beyond his reach—as if not being aware of what he was doing, the way a man doodles with a pencil or fiddles with a paperweight while talking to someone. When he asked openly for a drink he was told (for the record): "Help yourself. It's right there in front of you. That's what it's here for." They were very meticulous about it. Nothing could be proved afterward.

He didn't get a drink of water. But they didn't get the answers they wanted either. Another stalemate.

They rang in a couple of ingenious variations after that, once with cigarettes, another time by a refusal of the comfort facilities of the building. With even less result, since neither impulse was as strong as thirst.

"All we need is one drop of blood," the detective kept warning him. "One drop of blood."

"You won't get it out of me."

"We have identified the remains, to show there *was* a crime—somewhere. We've found traces of blood on articles handled by you—like the dollar bill you gave the storekeeper—to show, presumably, that you were involved in some crime—somewhere. We've placed *you* in the vicinity of the bungalow: metal bits from the overalls and remains of the paint cans and brush handles in the ashes of the fire. Now all we've got to do is place the crime *itself* there. And that will close the circuit.

"One drop of blood will do it. One single drop of blood."

"It seems a shame that such a modest requirement can't be met," was his ironic comment.

And then suddenly, when least expected, he was released.

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Whether there was some legal technicality involved and they were afraid of losing him altogether in the long run if they charged him too quickly; whether it was just a temporary expedient so that they could watch him all the closer—anyway, release.

One of the detectives came in, stood looking at him.

"Good morning," he said finally to the detective, sardonically, to break the optical deadlock.

"I suppose you'd like to get out of here."

"There are places I've liked better."

The detective jerked his head. "You can go. That's all for now. Sign a receipt and the property clerk will return your valuables."

He didn't stir. "Not if there are any strings attached to it."

"What do you want, an apology or something?"

"No, I just want to know where I stand. Am I in or am I out—or what."

"You were never actually under arrest, so what're you beefing about?"

"Well, if I wasn't, there sure has been something hampering my freedom. Maybe my shoelaces were tied together."

"Just hold yourself available in case you're needed. Don't leave town."

He finally walked out behind the detective, throwing an empty cigarette pack on the floor. "Was any of this in the newspapers?"

"I don't keep a scrapbook. I wouldn't know," said the detective.

He picked one up, and it was, had been, and was going to be.

The first thing he did was to phone Allie. She wouldn't come to the phone—or they wouldn't let her. She was ill in bed, they said. That much he didn't disbelieve, or wonder at. There was also a coldness, an iciness: he'd hurt these people badly.

He hung up. He tried again later. And then again. And still again. He wouldn't give up. His whole happiness was at stake now.

Finally he went back to his own apartment. There was nothing left for him to do. It was already well after midnight by this time. The phone was ringing as he keyed the door open. It sounded as if it had been ringing for some time and was about to die out. He grabbed at it.

"Darling," Allie said in a pathetically weak voice, "I'm calling you from the phone next to my bed. They don't know I'm doing it, or they—"

"You don't believe what you've been reading about me?"

"Not if you tell me not to."

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"It was just a routine questioning. I used to know the girl a long time ago, and they grabbed at every straw that came their way."

"We'll have to change everything—go off quietly by ourselves. But I don't care."

"I've got to see you. Shall I come up there?"

"No," she said tearfully. "Not yet. You'd better wait a while first. Give them a little more time."

"But then how am I going to—?"

"I'll dress and come out and meet you somewhere."

"Can you make it?"

"I'm getting better every minute. Just hearing your voice, hearing you say that it was not true—that's better than all their tranquilizers."

"There's a quiet little cocktail lounge called 'For Lovers Only.' Not noisy, not jammed. The end booth."

Her voice was getting stronger. "We were there once, remember?"

"Wear the same dress you did that night."

It was on all over again. "Hurry, I'm waiting for your hello-kiss."

He pulled his shirt off so exuberantly that he split the sleeve halfway down. He didn't care. He shook the shave-cream bomb until it nearly exploded in his hand. He went back to the phone and called a florist.

"I want an orchid sent somewhere—end booth—she'll be wearing pale yellow. I didn't ask you that, but what does come after the fifteen-dollar one? Then make it two fifteen-dollar ones. And on the card you just say this—'From a fellow to his girl.' "

And because he was young and in love—completely, sincerely in love, even though he'd killed someone who had once loved him the same way—he started, in his high spirits, in his release from long-sustained tension, to do a mimic Indian war dance, prancing around the room, now reared up high, now bent down low, drumming his hand against his mouth. "O-wah-o-wah!"

I beat it! he told himself, I've got it made. Just take it easy from here in, just talk with a small mouth—and I'm the one in a thousand who beat it!

Then someone knocked quietly on his door.

Less than an hour after going to bed, one of the detectives stirred and finally sat up again.

His wife heard him groping for his shoes to put them back on. "What's the matter?" she asked sleepily. "You want a drink of water?"

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"No," he said. "I want a drop of blood."

"If you couldn't find a drop of blood in the daytime how are you going to find it at night?"

He didn't answer; he just went ahead pulling his pants on.

"Oh, God," the poor woman moaned, "why did I ever marry a detective?"

"Oh, God," he groaned back from the direction of the door, "what makes you think you have?"

"O-wah-o-wah!"

Someone knocked quietly on his door.

He went over to it, and it was one of them again.

He looked at the intruder ruefully—confidently but ruefully. "What, again?" he sighed.

"This time it's for real."

"What was it all the other times, a rehearsal without costumes?"

"Hard to convince, aren't you? All right, I'll make it official," the detective said obligingly. "You're under arrest for the murder of Corinne Matthews. Anything-you-say-may-be-held-against-you-kindly- come-with-me."

"You did that like a professional," he smirked, still confident.

The detective had brought a car with him. They got in it.

"This is going to blow right up in your face. You know that, don't you? I'll sue for false arrest—I'll sue the city for a million."

"All right, I'll show you."

They drove to the bungalow that had been Corinne Matthews', and parked. They got out and went in together. They had to go through the doorway on the bias. The detective had him in handcuffs now—he wasn't taking any chances.

The detective left it dark. He took out his flashlight and made a big dazzling cartwheel of light by holding it nozzle-close against one section of the wall.

"Take a good look," he said.

"Why don't you put the lights on?"

"Take a good look this way first."

Just a newly painted, spotless wall, and at one side the light switch, tripped to OFF.

"Now look at it this way."

He killed the flashlight, snapped up the wall switch, and the room lit up. Still just a newly painted, spotless wall, and at one side the light switch, reversed now to ON.

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And on it a small blob of blood.

"That's what I needed. And look, that's what I got."

The accused sat down, the accuser at the other end of the handcuffs, standing, his arm at elbow height.

"How can a guy win?" the murderer whispered.

"You killed her at night, when the lights were on, when the switch was up like this, showing ON. You came back and painted in the daylight hours, when the lights were not on, when the switch was down, showing OFF. We cased this room a hundred times, for a hundred hours—*but always in the daytime too,* when the lights were not on, when the switch was down, showing OFF. And on the part of the switch *that never showed in the daytime,* the part marked ON, the way it is now, there was one drop of blood that we never found—until tonight."

The murderer was quiet for a minute, then he said the final words—no good to hold them back any more. "Sure," he said, "it was like that. That's what it was like."

His head went over, and a great huff of hot breath came surging out of him, rippling down his necktie, like the vital force, the will to resist, emptying itself.

The end of another story.

The end of another life.

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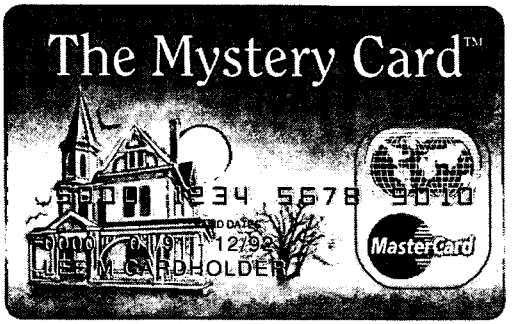

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a *NEW* short story by

MARTIN WERNER

The people at French & Saunders, New York's hottest advertising agency, were the best, brightest, and most creative money could buy. With that reputation to uphold, the Christmas party had to be the biggest and splashiest in the entire industry . . .

CHRISTMAS PARTY

by MARTIN WERNER

People in the advertising business said the Christmas party at French & Saunders was the social event of the year. For it wasn't your ordinary holiday office party. Not the kind where the staff gets together for a few mild drinks out of paper cups, some sandwiches sent in from the local deli, and a long boring speech by the company president. At F&S it was all very different: just what you'd expect from New York's hottest advertising agency.

The salaries there were the highest in town, the accounts were strictly blue chip, and the awards the agency won over the years filled an entire boardroom. And the people, of course, were the best, brightest, and most creative that money could buy.

With that reputation to uphold, the French & Saunders Christmas party naturally had to be the biggest and splashiest in the entire industry.

Year after year, that's the way it was. Back in the late Seventies, when discos were all the rage, the company took over Numero Uno, the club people actually fought over to get into. Another year, F&S hired half the New York Philharmonic to provide entertainment. And in 1989, the guest bartenders were Mel Gibson, Madonna, and the cast of *L.A. Law*.

There was one serious side to the party. That's when the president

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reviewed the year's business, announced how much the annual bonus would be, and then named the Board's choices for People of the Year, the five lucky employees who made the most significant contributions to the agency's success during the past twelve months.

The unwritten part to this latter (although everyone knew it, anyway) was that each one of the five would receive a very special individual bonus—some said as high as $50,000 apiece.

Then French & Saunders bought fifteen floors in the tallest, shiniest new office tower on Broadway, the one that had actually been praised by the *N.Y. Times* architecture critic.

The original plan was to hold the party in the brand-new offices that were to be ready just before Christmas. A foolish idea, as it turned out, because nothing in New York is ever finished when it's promised. The delay meant the agency had to scramble and find a new party site—either that, or make do in the half finished building itself.

Amazingly—cleverly?—enough, that was the game plan the party committee decided to follow. Give the biggest, glitziest party in agency history amid half finished offices in which paneless windows looked out to the open skies, where debris and building supplies stood piled up in every corner, and where doors opened on nothing but a web of steel girders and the sidewalk seventy floors below.

Charlie Evanston, one of the company's senior vice-presidents (he had just reached the ripe old age of fifty), was chosen to be party chairman. He couldn't have been happier. For Charlie had a deep-down feeling that this was finally going to be his year. After being passed over time and again for one of those five special Christmas bonuses, he just knew he was going to go home a winner.

Poor Charlie.

In mid-November—the plans for the party proceeding on schedule—the agency suddenly lost their multi-million-dollar Daisy Fresh Soap account, no reason given. Charlie had been the supervisor on the account for years, and although he couldn't be held personally responsible for the loss a few people (enemies!) shook their heads and wondered if maybe someone else, someone a little stronger—and younger—couldn't have held onto the business.

Two weeks later, another showpiece account—the prestigious Maximus Computer Systems—left the agency. Unheard of.

The trade papers gave away the reason in the one dreaded word

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"kickbacks." Two French & Saunders television producers who had worked on the account had been skimming it for years.

Again, Charlie's name came up. Not that he had anything remotely to do with the scandal. The trouble was that he personally had hired both offenders. And people remembered.

There's a superstition that events like these happen in threes, so it was only a question of time before the next blow. And, sure enough, two weeks before Christmas, it happened. A murder, no less. A F&S writer shot his wife, her lover, and himself.

With that, French & Saunders moved from front-page sidelines in the trade papers straight to screaming headlines in every tabloid in town. In less than a month, it had been seriously downgraded from one of New York's proudest enterprises to that most dreaded of advertising fates—an agency "in trouble."

It was now a week before Christmas and every F&S employee was carrying around his or her own personal lump of cold, clammy fear. The telltale signs were everywhere. People making secret telephone calls to headhunters and getting their resumes in order. Bitter jokes about the cold winter and selling apples on street corners told in the elevators and washrooms. Rumors that a buyout was in the making and *nobody* was safe.

And yet, strange as it sounds, there were those who still thought there would be a happy ending. At the Christmas party, perhaps. A last-minute announcement that everything was as before—the agency was in good shape and, just like always, everyone would get that Christmas bonus.

Charlie was one of the most optimistic. He didn't know why. Just a gut feeling that the world was still full of Christmas miracles and, bad times or not, he was going to be one of F&S's five magical People of the Year.

Poor Charlie.

A few days before the party, his phone rang. It was the voice of J. Stewart French, president and chairman of the board.

"Hi, Charlie. Got a minute?"

"Sure."

"I wonder if you'd mind coming up to my office. I've got a couple of things I'd like to talk to you about."

Nothing menacing about that, thought Charlie. J probably wants to discuss the party. The food. The caterers. The security measures

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that would be needed so that no one would be in any danger in those half finished offices.

Very neatly, very efficiently, Charlie got out his files and headed upstairs. When he arrived in the president's office—it was the only one that had been completely finished (vulgar but expensive, thought Charlie)—J was on the phone, his face pale and drawn, nothing like the way he usually looked, with that twelve-months-a-year suntan he was so proud of. He nodded over the phone. "Sit down, Charlie, sit down."

Charlie sank into one of the comfortable $12,000 chairs beside the desk and waited. After a minute the conversation ended and J turned to give him his full attention. Charlie had known J for fifteen years and had never seen him so nervous and ill at ease.

Then he spoke.

"Charlie, they tell me you've really got the Christmas party all together. Looks like it'll be a smash."

"We're hoping so, J."

"Well, we can certainly use some good times around here. I don't have to tell *you* that. It's been a bad, *bad* year."

"Things'll be better. I know it."

"Do you really think so, Charlie? Do you? I'd like to believe that, too. That's why this party means so much to me. To all of us. Morale—"

"I know."

"Well, you've certainly done your part. More than your part. That's why I called you in."

Here it comes, thought Charlie, here comes my special Christmas bonus! Ahead of time, before anyone else hears about it!

"I wanted you to be one of the first to know. The Board and I have agreed that, even with all our troubles, there'll be something extra in everybody's paycheck again this year. Nothing like before, of course, but it will be something."

"That's wonderful."

"Yeah. Wonderful. We monkeyed around with the budget and found we could come up with a few bucks. The *problem* is, we'll have to make some cuts here and there."

"Cuts?"

"Well, for one thing, I'm afraid there won't be any of those special bonuses this year, Charlie. And I'll level with you—you were down for one. After all these years, you had really earned it. I can't tell you how sorry—"

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Sure, thought Charlie. "It's not the end of the world, J," he said. "Maybe next year."

"No, Charlie, that's not all. With our losses and the cost of moving— I don't know how to tell you this, but we're doing something else. We're cutting back—some of our best people. I've never had to do anything like that in my life."

You bastard, Charlie thought. "Go on, J," he said. "I think I know what you're going to say."

J looked at him miserably. "You're one of the people we'll have to lose, Charlie. Wait a minute, please hear me out—it's nothing personal. I wanted to save you. After all, we've been together fifteen years. I talked and talked, I even threatened to resign myself. But no one wanted to listen."

Sure, Charlie thought.

"They said you hadn't produced anything worthwhile in years. And there was the business of those two crazies you hired. And—"

"Is that it?" Charlie asked.

"Don't get me wrong, Charlie. Please, let's do the Christmas party as we planned, just as if nothing happened. As for leaving, take your time. I got you a year's severance. And you can use your office to make calls, look around, and—"

"No problem, J." Charlie was moving to the door. "I understand. And don't worry about the party. Everything's all taken care of."

Not even a handshake.

Many people at some time or other have fantasized about killing the boss. In Charlie's case, it was different. From the minute he heard the bad news from J, he became a changed man. Not outwardly, of course. He wasn't about to become an overnight monster, buy a gun, make a bomb, sharpen an axe. No, he would be the same Charlie Evanston. Friendly. Smiling. Efficient. But now that he knew the worst, he began piling up all the long-suppressed injustices he had collected from J for fifteen years. The conversations that stopped abruptly when he entered an executive meeting. The intimate dinners at J's that he and his wife were never invited to. The countless other little slights. And, finally, this.

December 20. Party time! Everyone agreed it was the best bash French & Saunders had ever thrown.

The day was fair and warm. The milling crowds that drifted from the well stocked bars and refreshment tables didn't even notice there

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wasn't a heating system. The lack of carpets, the wide-open window spaces, the empty offices—it all added to the fun.

Carefully groomed waiters in white gloves and hard hats pressed their way from room to room, carrying silver trays laden with drinks and hors d'oeuvres. A heavy metal band blared somewhere. A troupe of strolling violinists pressed in and out. From the happy faces, laughter, and noise, you'd never know the agency had a care in the world.

But Charlie Evanston knew. He pushed his way over to a small crowd pressing around J. All of them were drunk, or on the way, and J, drink in hand, was swaying slightly. His laugh was louder than anybody's whenever one of the clients told a funny story. He spotted Charlie and shouted to him. "Charlie, c'mere a minute! Folks, you all know my old pal Charlie Evanston. We've been together since this place opened its doors. He's the guy who put this whole great party together."

There were murmurs of approval as J drew Charlie into his embrace.

"J," Charlie said, "I just came to ask you to come over here and let me show you something."

"Oh, Charlie, always business. Can't it wait till next week? After the holidays?"

"No, I think it's important. Please come over here. Let me show you."

"Oh, for Chrissakes, Charlie. What *is* it?"

"Just follow me. Won't take long."

J pulled away from the group with a back-in-a-minute wave of his hand and followed Charlie down a narrow hall to a room that would one day become the heart of the agency's computer operation.

It was empty. Even the floors hadn't been finished. Just some wooden planks, a few steel beams—and the sidewalk below. J glanced around the room and turned to Charlie. "So? What's the problem?"

"Don't you get it, J? There isn't a single Keep Out sign on that outside door. The workmen even forgot to lock it. Someone could walk in here and fall straight down to Broadway!"

"Oh, come on, Charlie, this place is off the beaten path—no one's going to be coming this way. Stop worrying."

"Yes, but—"

"No buts, Charlie. Just tell one of the security guards. My God, you drag me all the way out here just to see this. Jesus Christ, I'll

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bet I could even *walk* across one of these steel beams. The workmen do it every day."

It was uncanny. Charlie knew that was exactly what J would say. It was part of the macho, daredevil reputation he had cultivated so carefully. "Hey, wait a minute, J," he said.

"No. Serious. Watch me walk across this beam right here. It can't be more than twenty feet long. And I'll do it with a drink in each hand."

"Come on, J, don't be crazy."

But J had already taken his first tentative step on the beam—with Charlie directly behind him.

It was all so simple. Now all Charlie had to do was give J the tiniest of shoves in the back, watch him stagger and plunge over the side, and it would be all over.

As J continued to move along the beam, he seemed to grow more confident. Charlie continued to follow a few steps behind, his right arm outstretched. It was now or never. Suddenly he made his move. But J moved a couple of quick steps faster and Charlie missed J's back by an inch. Instead, he felt himself slipping over the side. He gasped. Then all he remembered was falling.

The hospital room was so quiet you could barely hear a murmur from the corridor outside.

On the single bed there lay what looked like a dead body. Every inch was covered in a rubbery casing and yards and yards of white gauze. All you could see of what was underneath was a little round hole where the mouth was supposed to be and another opening where a bloodshot blue eye stared up at the ceiling. Charlie Evanston.

The door opened slightly, admitting J, followed by one of Charlie's doctors.

J shuddered. He always did, every time he'd visited over the past six months. He turned to the doctor. "How's he doing today?"

"About the same. He tries to talk a little now and then."

"Can he hear me yet? Can he understand?"

"We think so. But don't try and get anything out of him."

"Yes. I know." He bent over the bed. "Charlie. Charlie. It's me, J. I just wanted you to know I'm here. And I want to thank you again—I guess I'll be thanking you for the rest of my life—for reaching out and trying to save me at that damn Christmas party."

The blue eye blinked. A tear began to tremble on the edge.

"I was a fool. Only a fool would have tried to do what I did. And

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you tried to stop me. I felt you grab my jacket and try to hold me back. Then you took the fall for me."

The blue eye stared.

"So what I came to say—what I hope you can understand—is that no matter how long it takes you're going to get the best care we can find. Just get well. Everything's going to be okay."

The blue eye continued to look at J without blinking.

"And, Charlie, here's the best news of all. The agency's just picked up three big accounts. Over a hundred million."

A light breeze blew the curtains from the window.

"So today the Board asked me to come up here and give you a special bonus. Not a Christmas bonus—more like a Purple Heart. You deserve it, Charlie. You saved the old man's life, you bastard!"

Charlie tried to nod, but it was impossible.

"And just wait till you come back," J said enthusiastically. "You're a hero, Charlie! We've got all kinds of great things waiting for you. All kinds of plans. It's going to be a whole new ballgame, Charlie! Imagine!"

Yeah, thought Charlie. Imagine.

DETECTIVERSE

THE UNSOLVED CASE

by ANNE WHITEHOUSE

A young detective named Dan
Found a corpse in the back of a van;
Of the killer no trace—
With relief, closed the case—
For, you see, he had murdered the man.

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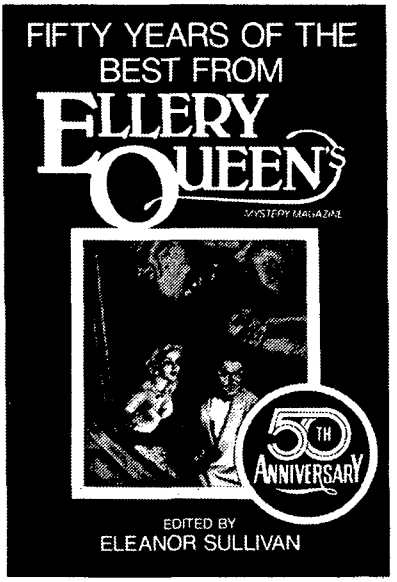

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a *NEW* Dr. Sam Hawthorne story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

To add a little variety to this special holiday issue, a story with no Christmas tie-in other than being a delightful present to fans of the classic puzzle and the incomparable Mr. Hoch . . .

THE PROBLEM OF THE GRANGE HALL

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Dr. Lincoln Jones, Northmont's first black physician, joined the staff of Pilgrim Memorial Hospital in March of 1929 [Dr. Sam Hawthorne reminisced as he poured two glasses of wine]. The hospital opened that month, and I've already told you about the Pilgrims Windmill affair and the trouble we had at the time with ghostly figures, a terrible fire, and threats from the Ku Klux Klan.

Happily for us all, the next eight years passed uneventfully for Lincoln Jones—if you can call marriage and the birth of two children uneventful. I wasn't on the hospital staff myself, but my office was in the physicians' wing of the building and I usually saw Linc a couple of times a week. He was a tall, handsome man on the verge of forty like myself, specializing in children's illnesses. In the city he would have been called a pediatrician, but in Northmont we weren't nearly so fancy.

It was decided that the hospital would celebrate its eighth anniversary that March with a community dinner and a dance at the Grange Hall. Eighth anniversaries aren't usually worth noting, but the Depression had been hard on Pilgrim Memorial along with every other facet of American life. The hospital needed money for new equipment, and the celebration was a perfect opportunity to raise

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some of it. The committee was bringing in a big New York band, Sweeney Lamb and his All-Stars, for the dance.

"Are you and your wife going to the dance on Saturday?" I asked Linc Jones one day when I encountered him in the hospital corridor.

"Do we have any choice?" he answered with a grin. It had been made clear that all of the staff physicians and doctors with offices in the building were expected to purchase a pair of tickets. "Who are you taking?"

"My nurse Mary Best," I told him. "She deserves a treat for putting up with me."

"Well, it should be fun. I went to high school with Sweeney Lamb's trumpet player, a fellow named Bix Blake. Haven't seen him in years."

The Grange Hall was out beyond the hospital, almost to the edge of town. I felt a bit like a high school kid myself on Friday night, calling for Mary Best at the small house she rented, going up to the door with a corsage to go with her dress.

"How nice of you, Sam!" she told me as she pinned it on. "This is just like a date." She may have been gently mocking my bachelor status but I couldn't be sure.

"It's not every week we have a dance with a big city orchestra here in Northmont."

The month of March had started out cold that year but there'd been very little snow. By the weekend of the dance it was feeling almost like spring. As I parked my car and helped Mary out, taking care that her long gown didn't drag on the ground, the first arrivals we saw were Sheriff Lens and his wife. We exchanged warm greetings and walked into the hall together. The sheriff and I had worn blue suits, and I was surprised to see some of the hospital and town officials in tuxedos. "It's sure a big night," the sheriff said. We went in and found a table together, with me sitting between Vera Lens and Mary.

"A little excitement in this town at last!" Vera Lens said. She was younger than the sheriff and they'd been married about ten years. "I hope it'll liven things up. We haven't even had a good murder since last summer."

"And let's hope we *don't* have one," the sheriff told her, "at least not tonight."

I spotted Linc Jones and his wife Charlene at another table. "Let's go say hello," I suggested to Mary.

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The tables were arranged in a horseshoe shape around the dance floor, with the bandstand at the front of the hall. Linc and his wife were opposite us, on the other side of the horseshoe. "Well, Sam! Good to see you here. You remember my wife Charlene, don't you?"

"I certainly do!" She'd be hard to forget, a lovely dark-skinned woman who knew how to use just the right amount of make-up. It had been the talk of Pilgrim Memorial when he returned from vacation that first year with a new wife.

"Hello, Sam," she said with a smile. "Good to see you again. You too, Mary."

Sweeney Lamb's musicians were beginning to take the stage. Until then I hadn't thought much about Linc's high school chum, and the fact that the Sweeney Lamb orchestra had always been white. There was an audible murmur from a few tables as two black musicians joined the fifteen others on stage. One of them carried a trumpet and Linc Jones waved to him.

"That's my old buddy," he said. "Come on up, Sam, and I'll introduce you."

Bix Blake was darker than Linc, with a pushed-in nose that may have been broken at one time. I saw him frown as we approached, and his eyes seemed to go beyond our heads to the table where we'd been seated. "Lincoln Jones," he said with a trace of resignation. "I forgot this was your town."

"It's not really mine, Bix. This here's Sam Hawthorne, one of the doctors I work with."

I held out my hand. "How are you, Bix? Welcome to Northmont. We've all been looking forward to this affair."

Blake's handshake was firm. "It's a bit different from playin' in New York."

"Can we get together after?" Linc asked. "We've got a lot of catching up to do."

Bix Blake worked the valves of his trumpet. "Our bus is leavin' right after the show, but I'll be back in that little dressing room during the break, after the first hour. Come back then."

"I'll do that."

Sweeney Lamb himself had appeared by that time, fronting the band as he murmured instructions to some of his people. He was fairly well known and I recognized him at once from his pictures—handsome, broad-shouldered, with traces of grey in his hair. In person his eyeglasses were thicker than I'd expected but otherwise he was just like his photographs. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Lamb,"

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I said. "I'm Dr. Sam Hawthorne from the hospital. Dr. Jones here went to school with your trumpeter."

He glanced at Linc, and then over at Bix. "Nice town you got here," he said, not offering to shake either of our hands. He started adjusting the microphone and we took the hint that the music was about to begin.

Back at the table Charlene asked, "Did he remember you?"

"Oh, sure," Linc answered. "We're getting together during the break."

"Did he ask about me?"

"No."

I glanced from one to the other. "You knew him too, Charlene?"

She glanced down without replying and Linc answered for her. "They were engaged once, briefly, but that was a long time ago."

"Bix said I picked Linc instead of him because I wanted to marry a doctor and have lots of money."

Mary Best placed her hand on Charlene's and tried to say something comforting but just then Sweeney Lamb's voice boomed through the Grange Hall.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! It's a pleasure to be here in Northmont to help you folks celebrate the eighth anniversary of Pilgrim Memorial Hospital. I'm Sweeney Lamb, but I guess you all knew that." He paused for the applause and then continued, "Before we strike up the band for an evening of fabulous music, we're going to hear just a few words from the director of Pilgrim Memorial, Dr. Robert Yale."

Bob Yale had been part of Pilgrim Memorial since its beginning, and when the previous director retired he'd been the logical successor. He was bright, articulate, and willing to try new things. "I won't keep you long," he told the audience. "I know we're all anxious to get out on the dance floor. Just remember why we're here. Pilgrim Memorial needs your help. We need money. Northmont may be a small community, but the hospital is known and respected in this state. I want it to stay that way. I want us to grow as the community grows, to be ready for tomorrow's challenges. The medical problems of today, whether TB or polio or cancer, cannot be met with yesterday's equipment. You know our goal—help us to reach it! And now, without further ado, it's back to Sweeney Lamb and his All-Stars!"

Lamb's band opened with a jazzy theme and then switched to something slower for dancing. *Pennies From Heaven* and *Red Sails in the Sunset* had even some of the older townspeople out on the

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floor. "Your friend Bix is mighty good with that trumpet," I told Lincoln Jones.

"I'm glad to see some black faces up there. It's been a big problem, especially for a band that tours. In most cities the Negro musicians have to stay at separate hotels. But some of the big New York bands are starting to integrate their players now."

After another jazz tune Sweeney Lamb took the microphone to announce, "Now, as a special treat, the song stylings of Miss Helen McDonald, with Spider Downs on saxophone."

A blonde young woman in a long pink dress came on stage and bowed, then started a dreamy rendition of *It's a Sin to Tell a Lie.* Mary stirred and stood up. "Aren't you ever going to ask me to dance, Sam?"

"Sorry," I said, perhaps blushing a bit. I'd been enjoying the music so much that I'd almost forgotten she was my date for the evening. I certainly owed her a dance or two. Linc and Charlene quickly joined us to cover my awkwardness.

"She's good," Mary Best decided, fitting comfortably into my arms. "I think I've heard her on the radio."

Helen McDonald was indeed good. There was a swinging beat to the way she delivered the lyrics that really put them across. On the next number, *The Way You Look Tonight,* Bix Blake contributed a trumpet bit and then Spider Downs, the other black musician, did a saxophone solo. Sweeney passed around some sheet music for the next selection. Helen and Spider Downs each took one. She folded hers and passed it on to Bix, then stood on the sidelines while the band played an instrumental version of *I'm Putting All My Eggs in One Basket.* After that they took a break.

I stopped to say a few words to Bob Yale, the hospital director. "Great evening, Bob! This should encourage a few donations."

"I certainly hope so."

Linc Jones had walked on ahead, crossing the dance floor to intercept Bix. Watching them from a distance, I wondered just how friendly they were. Bix's face, at that moment, was twisted into an expression like pain or anger. I walked close enough to hear Linc compliment him on his playing, and Bix reply, "I'll be better next set." Bix led the way to a door behind the stage, apparently the dressing room he'd mentioned earlier.

I saw that Mary was at the table alone. "Where's Charlene?"

"Ladies' room. I didn't feel like battling the crowd."

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I kept an eye on the dressing room door as we spoke. After several minutes, they still hadn't emerged and, feeling a concern I couldn't quite express, I headed back in that direction. Sweeney Lamb appeared at that moment, glancing around the floor. "Seen Bix?" he asked me.

"I believe he's in there, chatting with an old high-school friend."

Lamb walked to the door I'd indicated, and the other black musician, Spider Downs, joined us. The bandleader knocked and tried the knob. "It's locked."

I tried knocking and called out, "Linc! It's Sam Hawthorne. Open up!"

A voice beyond the door distinctly said, "Sam!" I didn't know whether it was a cry for help or only one of recognition, but I felt I had to get in there. I rattled the knob uselessly. "Who's got the key to this?"

"No key," Lamb said. "There's a bolt on the other side. We used it as a dressing room earlier."

"Help me with this," I asked the black musician. We hit the door together with our shoulders and the bolt pulled from the wooden frame. The door sprang open.

Lincoln Jones was kneeling next to the body of his old school chum. In one hand he held a hypodermic needle. "What's happened here, Linc?"

"I—I don't know."

I knelt on the other side of Bix Blake and felt for a pulse. Behind me I heard the voice of Sheriff Lens. "What's goin' on here? Let me through, please. I'm the sheriff. What is it, Doc?"

I looked up at him. "Bix Blake. He's dead."

Sheriff Lens took in the rest of the scene in an instant. He wasn't the smartest man in the world but he knew his job. "Doc Jones," he said, reaching out his hand, "you'd best give me that hypodermic."

Word of the tragedy spread quickly through the large room, becoming as distorted as one might expect under the tense circumstances. As I headed back to the table to tell Mary, the first person I encountered was Charlene Jones. "What in God's name has happened?" she demanded, close to hysteria. "Someone just told me Linc stabbed a man!"

"Nothing like that," I assured her. "Bix Blake is dead and no one knows what happened. There was no knife. Linc had a hypodermic needle—"

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"What for? What does it mean?"

"He may have been trying to save Bix's life. We don't know yet."

"I have to see Linc," she insisted, pushing past me toward the crowded doorway.

Finally I reached our table and told Mary Best what had happened. "Do you think Linc killed him?" she asked, getting right to the point.

"I don't know. We have to find out what killed him first."

Dr. Bob Yale came hurrying over. "What do you know about this, Sam?"

"Very little. One of the black musicians, the trumpet player, is dead. Linc Jones was with him when he died."

"My God! Does this mean they won't be finishing the dance?"

"You'll have to ask Sweeney Lamb that." At the moment a man's death seemed more important to me.

But Bob Yale did get to Lamb, and I saw the two of them off in a corner a few minutes later. When Yale returned to me he was all smiles. "They don't have another job for three nights. He's willing to stay in Northmont and do the whole thing again tomorrow night. How does that sound?"

"For the same price?" I asked skeptically.

"He's donating it. Do you think everyone will come back, Sam?"

"Bix Blake won't."

I walked away from him as an ambulance arrived from Pilgrim Memorial. The person I really wanted to see was Sheriff Lens, but it was another half-hour before I found him alone, looking decidedly unhappy. By that time the word had spread that the dance had been postponed until the following night, and some people were beginning to depart.

"How does it look, Sheriff?"

"Not good for Lincoln Jones, Doc. I want you to sit in while I go over his story in detail."

"Glad to. Want to do it now?"

"I'm just waiting for a preliminary report from the hospital. There's a slight chance it was a natural death, but I doubt it. Looks to me like he was injected with some fast-acting poison."

"Surely not by Linc!"

"I don't know, Doc. The room has no windows and the only door was bolted from inside. No one else was in there."

"Can I take a look at it? I just had a glimpse when we broke in."

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He led the way to the broken door, which he'd secured with a length of twine. I entered behind him and stared at the walls. Its main function was obviously as a storeroom, and cardboard boxes were stacked along the left wall. I looked inside one and found extra tablecloths, apparently on loan for tonight's function. The room was about fifteen feet square, with a line of mirrors fastened to the wall opposite the door. Chairs and small tables were placed in front of the mirrors, the best the Grange could offer in the way of dressing room facilities. Along the right wall was a pipe with wooden coat-hangers holding the band members' outerwear, a variety of coats and jackets.

"Someone could have been hiding behind these coats," I suggested.

"That's pretty doubtful, Doc, but let's see what Jones has to say."

They were beginning to clear the tables in the hall now, and Sweeney Lamb was standing with the girl singer, Helen McDonald. Both of them seemed to be in a daze.

"He was such a nice man," the blonde girl said. I doubted if she was much over twenty. "Do they think it was a heart attack?"

"We're waiting for word from the hospital," I told her. Then, turning to the bandleader, I asked, "Did Bix have any health problems?"

"He's only been with me a few months but he seemed healthy enough. Let me ask Spider." He called to the black musician who'd helped me break in the door earlier. "This is Spider Downs, a damn fine saxophone man. He and Bix joined the band together. Spider, you knew him longer than I did. Were there any health problems?"

Spider was a short, bald man who was built like a barrel. He was probably no older than me and his chest and shoulders were those of a weight lifter or piano mover. "Nothing to kill him," Spider assured us. "His lip gave him some trouble once in a while, but that's not unusual for horn men. We live with it."

I spotted Bob Yale hurrying into the hall, bound for Sheriff Lens, and I wanted to hear his report. I joined them just as he was saying, "The preliminary result is that death was due to respiratory failure caused by an intravenous injection of methylmorphine."

Sheriff Lens looked blank. "Methylmorphine?"

"Better known as codeine," I explained.

"I take that stuff in cough medicine," the sheriff said.

Dr. Yale nodded. "This would have been a purer version, quite fatal even in small doses."

"The hypodermic needle?" I asked.

Yale nodded. "Full of it. There was a puncture mark in his thigh."

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"Then he was murdered," the sheriff said.

I liked to caution against jumping to conclusions. "Suicide is always a possibility."

"Come on, Doc. Let's go talk to Lincoln Jones."

Linc had been sitting with his wife back at the table, and when the sheriff asked him to accompany us she started to come too. "What's this all about, Sheriff? What are you trying to say Linc did?"

"Nothing, yet. I just want to ask him some questions about what happened."

"He didn't do a thing! Bix Blake was always a trouble-maker. Alive or dead, he's a trouble-maker."

"Hush now!" Linc told her, rising to follow us.

The sheriff led us back to the death scene, as I knew he would. We pulled out three of the chairs facing the mirrors and Linc asked, right away, "What killed him?"

"The needle was full of codeine," I said quietly. "It was injected into his thigh."

Linc didn't seem too surprised. "He acted like he couldn't breathe."

"Tell us exactly what happened," the sheriff suggested.

"Well, I knew Bix from our high school days. Before the dance began I even took Sam up to meet him. We decided to catch up on things during the break between sets. We came in here together to talk."

"Who bolted the door?" I asked.

"Bix did. He said if anyone wanted a smoke he could go outside."

"Did you argue?" Sheriff Lens asked.

Linc averted his eyes. "We had nothing to argue about."

"Did you argue?" he repeated.

"Not really. He mentioned Charlene."

"Your wife?"

"He was engaged to her once, but that was long ago, in the old neighborhood."

"What did he say about Charlene?" I prodded.

"He said I'd stolen her away because I went to college. She wanted to marry a doctor and be wealthy. It was nothing new. He told Charlene the same thing twelve years ago."

"Did you fight?"

"Physically? Of course not! By that time I could see he was having trouble breathing."

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"What about the needle?" the sheriff wanted to know.

"There was no needle. Not then."

"You'd better explain yourself."

Linc shifted on his chair. For the first time he appeared nervous. "Well, his breathing kept getting worse and I asked what was wrong. I just thought he was overwrought, but then I saw it was more than that. Suddenly he just collapsed—right about there, in the center of the room. Right where you found him. I dropped to my knees to examine him, then started giving artificial respiration. That was when I noticed the needle, lying near his foot. I picked it up to examine it just as you broke down the door."

"Is it possible that he injected the poison himself, that he meant to commit suicide?"

"No, no. That would have been impossible. His hands were in full view at all times. I'll tell you I was watching them because I feared he might take a punch at me."

"Refresh my memory," I said. "What happened to that needle after we burst into the room."

"The sheriff asked me for it and I handed it to him."

Sheriff Lens nodded. "Wrapped it real careful in a clean handkerchief and turned it over to the ambulance people when they came for the body. Should have gotten some pictures of the scene, but we weren't sure it was murder then."

"You're not sure now," I reminded him.

"I'm sure. Dr. Jones, I'm goin' to have to hold you for further questioning, on suspicion of murder."

Linc sighed and stood up. "Let me speak with my wife. Then I'll come with you."

We went back to the hall and he crossed the floor to the table where Charlene sat with Mary Best. "You're making a big mistake, Sheriff."

"Tell me how else it could have been, Doc."

"I'm not ready to do that yet."

Charlene listened to Linc's quiet words and then started to cry. "They can't do this to you! That damned Bix Blake! You never killed him."

"I know that, darlin'. Just see what you can do about getting me a good lawyer. And take care of the kids till I get back."

The dance had been on a Friday night, and the next morning everyone in town was talking about it. Bob Yale was talking about

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squeezing in a few more tables for that evening because so many people wanted to come. "It's going to make more money for us, Sam."

I'd walked down the hall to his office in the hospital wing, wanting to clarify a few things. "Some would consider it blood money," I pointed out. "You know Linc is innocent."

"I'd like to think he is. There's pretty nasty talk around town, though. They know Lincoln would never harm a hair on their heads, but this Bix was someone from his past—another Negro—and they were arguing about a black woman."

"She happens to be Linc's wife, and I hardly think he killed someone over her after all these years. Bix Blake was certainly no threat to their marriage."

"How do you know?"

I walked out in disgust, deciding I'd rather talk to Linc down at the jail. When I arrived, Charlene was with him. I decided to talk with Sheriff Lens instead.

"He'll be taken before the judge on Monday, Doc, and probably held for the grand jury. He's got motive: the fight about his wife. He's got opportunity, the only one with opportunity. And he's got method. I figure the codeine is available at the hospital."

"Yes," I admitted.

"How long does it take to kill someone with it?"

"If you swallow it in that strength you'd get sleepy and have trouble breathing within twenty minutes. Injected into the bloodstream, the effects are immediate."

"It kills instantly?"

"Theoretically, yes. In practice, the victim's size, health, and drug tolerance would be factors that could slow the action for several minutes."

"Did you get a look at the needle, Doc?"

"Briefly, yes."

"I understand from Dr. Yale it's the sort used at Pilgrim Memorial."

"It's the sort used just about everywhere, the most popular brand. Anyone who's diabetic probably has one at home."

Sheriff Lens chewed on his lower lip. He was holding Linc Jones for a judge but I could see he wasn't happy about it. "Let's look at the possibilities, Doc. Did Blake kill himself? No, because Lincoln Jones never saw the needle in his hand. Did someone else hide in the room and jab him with the needle? No, because there was no hiding place."

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"I haven't quite agreed to that yet. I'll want another look at the room."

"Was he jabbed after you burst into the room? No, because Jones was already holding the needle and Blake was dead."

"Agreed."

"If he didn't kill himself, and Lincoln Jones was the only person with him, then Lincoln Jones must have killed him. It's as simple as that, Doc."

"It's not that simple because he didn't do it. You don't go to a dance with a hypodermic needle full of poison because you might encounter someone you disagreed with twelve years earlier. Linc approached him as an old friend, not an enemy."

"Maybe Bix Blake brought the poison to kill Jones, they struggled and he got jabbed in the leg."

"Same argument, Sheriff. Would he have brought poison to use on Linc, after all those years? Linc, at least, didn't even realize there was still animosity over his marriage to Charlene. Besides, if it happened that way, in self-defense, Linc would have no reason to lie about what occurred."

Sheriff Lens sighed. "Then it's another one of your locked-room puzzles, Doc."

"Maybe." I glanced at my watch. It was after noon and I wanted to speak with Sweeney Lamb. "I'm going to shove off now. Tell Linc I didn't want to interrupt his visit with Charlene. I'll be back to see him later."

Most of the band was at Northmont's only hotel, but Helen McDonald told me Sweeney was out at the bus. "I'll take you there if you'd like," she offered.

"That would be helpful."

It was parked about a block from the hotel in an undeveloped field. "I feel terrible about Bix," she said as we walked. "I'd gotten to be real friendly with him in the months since he joined the band."

"Was he at the hotel with the rest of you?"

"Oh, sure. Spider's there too. We don't have much trouble in New England."

"What happens when there is trouble?"

"Bix and Spider have been known to sleep on the bus."

I could see it was a vehicle with many miles on it, in need of a paint job. Sweeney Lamb was seated inside, going over some sheet music arrangements for the evening performance. "Gotta make it a

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bit different from last night's selection," he explained. "And someone else has to play Bix's part."

"Who'll that be?"

"Probably Spider. He doubles on the trumpet."

I thought about that. "Is it a job to kill for?"

Lamb and Helen both laughed. "Not hardly," the bandleader replied. "They pay the same, and the trumpet and sax both get solos in different numbers."

I picked up a scrapbook that was lying on the seat next to him. There were newspaper ads for the band, and pictures of their performances. One from last summer showed them playing in short-sleeved shirts at a Coney Island jazz festival. "You play all sorts of music," I said.

"Well, jazz and pop."

I flipped over a few more pages and found a two-year-old photo of Helen McDonald in a sexy strapless gown. I smiled at her. "I thought you were just out of high school."

"Don't I wish!"

"Did either of you ever see Bix with a hypodermic needle?" I asked.

Sweeney Lamb frowned. "I don't allow no drugs in my band. Any needles, they're out! I had a drummer die of a heroin overdose just last summer."

"Have the police been on you about it?"

"They don't bother us," Helen replied. "Sweeney runs a clean crew."

I decided there was nothing more to be learned there. "We'll be looking forward to tonight."

He nodded. "A fresh start. I'll open with a little tribute to Bix and then we take off with a new beginning."

I left Helen on the bus and headed back to my office at Pilgrim Memorial. I had no patients scheduled that Saturday, but Mary was in the office and there was always the possibility of an emergency.

"Not a thing," she told me, "except Charlene Jones. She stopped by after visiting Linc at the jail."

"Where is she now?"

She nodded toward my inner office, where the door was standing open. I could see Charlene in the patients' chair by my desk. I walked in and asked, "How's Linc doing?"

"Not bad. He knows he's innocent. It's just some terrible mistake."

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"Tell me about you and Bix. Did you break your engagement to him?"

"That was right out of high school. We were all awfully young. He admitted it was the right thing."

"Might he have killed himself and tried to frame Linc?"

"I hadn't seen him in maybe twelve years. Neither grudges nor romances last that long without a little fuel. Whatever happened to Bix had nothing to do with either Linc or me."

I pressed my lips together, thinking. "Could you come down to the Grange Hall with me, Charlene? Right now?"

"What for?"

"I want to try something."

"All right."

The place was already open for the evening's dance and I led the way at once to the makeshift dressing room. "This is where it happened," I told her. "The men changed their clothes here."

"What about the girl singer?"

"She used it later, during their first few instrumentals."

Charlene was a small woman, but I could see at once that my first theory was a loser. She was far too large to have hidden in one of the boxes of tablecloths. "Would you stand behind that rack of coats, please?"

She didn't move. She just stood there staring at me. "My God, Sam, you think I killed him somehow!"

"No, no—"

"Yes, you do! What motive could I have had? Even if I'd done it, do you think I'd let Linc go to jail in my place?"

"Please, Charlene, just stand behind the coats."

This time she did as I asked, but I could clearly see her feet beneath the coats. "Could you grab the pipe and pull yourself up?" She gamely tried it and the pipe almost pulled free from the wall. Surely there'd been no one hiding in the room either before or after Bix's death.

"Satisfied?" she asked.

"I just had to check all the possibilities. You were away from the table during the crucial period."

She left the room without another word and I feared that I may have lost a friend.

I went back to the hospital next, and found Sheriff Lens with Bob Yale outside the latter's office. "Hi, Doc. Just stopped by to pick up the dead man's clothes." He held up a paper bag.

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"Stop in my office before you leave, Sheriff."

A couple of minutes later he appeared in my door. "What's up, Doc?"

"I just had an idea. I'd like to see the clothes Bix was wearing."

The sheriff opened the bag and dumped them on my examining table. "I went over them quick and didn't find anything."

I started checking the pockets and the sheriff chuckled. "Nothin' in that one but a hole."

There was indeed a small hole in the side pants pocket. I stuck my finger through it and wondered about the workings of fate. "Where's Bix's body, Sheriff?"

"Still here at the hospital, waitin' for instructions from the next of kin."

"Let's go take a look at it."

I'd never gotten used to examining day-old corpses, but it took me only a moment to find what I was looking for. "See this, Sheriff? And *this*?"

"What does it mean?"

"Tonight we're going to catch ourselves a murderer."

The dance that evening might have been a replica of the previous night's affair. Most everyone was dressed in the same clothes, and before the music started I asked Sweeney Lamb to duplicate everything he'd done on Friday night. "You mean play the same tunes?"

"Exactly," I said. "They'll get new music in the second set."

People looked around at each other as Sweeney Lamb and Dr. Yale made their opening remarks again, then really began to feel spooked when the band opened with their theme and then switched into *Pennies From Heaven.*

"Is this your idea?" Mary Best asked.

"It is," I admitted. "We'll see if it's a good one."

Spider Downs was playing Bix's part on the trumpet, and his own chair was empty. Otherwise everything was the same. Helen McDonald appeared on cue wearing the same pink gown and launched into *It's a Sin to Tell a Lie.*

A number of couples were on the dance floor, but others remained at their tables as if waiting to see what would happen. As the set drew near its concluding number I caught the eye of Sheriff Lens. Sweeney Lamb was on the bandstand, passing out the sheet music for the final arrangement, just as he had the night before. Helen

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McDonald hesitated, then took one and passed it on to Spider, seated in Bix's place.

"Come on!" I told the sheriff.

She turned pale as she saw us coming, and tried to leave the bandstand. But I had one arm and Sheriff Lens had the other. "You'd better come with us, Miss McDonald," he told her. "We want to ask you about the murder of Bix Blake."

"I didn't—"

"Yes, you did," I told her. "You killed him and we're going to prove it."

News of the killing had reached New York, and by the time the second night's dance ended there were big-city reporters waiting with their questions. I was glad we had a few answers.

With Bob Yale from the hospital and Sweeney Lamb both standing nearby, Sheriff Lens began. "We expect a full statement from Miss McDonald shortly, and Dr. Lincoln Jones will be released from jail within the hour. For the rest of it, I'm going to turn you over to Dr. Sam Hawthorne who played an important part in assisting with my investigations."

I stood to address the gathering.

"It appeared at first that Bix Blake had been murdered by an injection of codeine while in a locked room with only Lincoln Jones present," I began, capturing their attention from the start. "However, further investigation suggested another possibility. Bix may have been injected with the poison before he entered the room and locked the door."

Bob Yale interrupted. "Codeine injected in that strong of a dosage usually takes effect immediately."

I nodded. "But its symptoms can be delayed a few minutes or longer by a drug tolerance, which is exactly what Bix Blake had. It's not unheard-of among musicians these days. I believe he was a heroin addict. He injected the hypodermic needle into his own thigh at the end of the first set, through a hole in his pants pocket. A close examination of the body this afternoon revealed previous needle marks in the thighs. They'd been missed on the initial examination because of his dark skin."

"You're saying he committed suicide?"

"Hardly. A hypo full of an almost clear codeine solution could easily be mistaken for white heroin. Bix wouldn't have chosen to kill himself in front of his old friend Linc, at least not without telling

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him the reason. I think Bix was murdered by his drug supplier, who gave him a needle full of codeine instead of heroin. That's why I wanted a repeat performance tonight that followed last evening's events exactly.

"I thought I remembered something from last night, but I had to see it again to be sure. When Sweeney here passed out the sheet music arrangements for the final song of the set, Helen McDonald took one, even though it was an instrumental in which she had no part. She then folded the sheet music and passed it to Bix. Tonight I saw her take the sheet music but she didn't fold it when she passed it to Spider in Bix's chair. Last night she passed Bix the deadly hypo in the fold of that sheet music. I noticed the pain on his face as he left the bandstand to meet Linc, immediately after injecting himself. And he told Linc he'd be better next set, meaning when the drug took effect. But there was no next set for Bix. As he grew weaker and died in that dressing room, the needle slipped through the hole in his pocket and fell to the floor next to his feet, where Lincoln Jones found it."

Lamb could only shake his head. "Why was he injecting it into his thigh rather than his arm?"

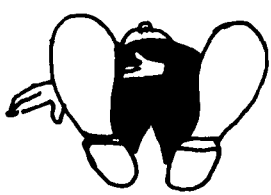
"Because your band wears short-sleeved shirts in the summer, I saw the picture in your scrapbook."

"But even if she was supplying Bix with drugs, why would Helen kill him?"

Sheriff Lens answered that one. "Her initial statement indicates he'd been blackmailing her for free drugs, threatening to tell you that she was responsible for the heroin death of your drummer last year. They both knew how you felt about drugs in the band."

Lamb seemed crushed by what had happened. Perhaps the tragedy of it, for Bix and Helen and his drummer, was only now sinking in. I left him and went down to the jail, so I'd be there when Linc was released. Charlene saw me coming and even managed a smile.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for getting him out."



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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

There was a time when I would pounce eagerly on any detective novel that involved a serial killer. Now I'm sure I'm not alone in groaning slightly when I find one and having an impulse to lay it aside unread. Why the change?

In the twenties, thirties, and forties, the serial killer situation was relatively uncommon because it was tough to bring off in a classical detective story. When writers of the Golden Age of Detection addressed a serial murder plot, they were obliged by the rules they played under to find a motive and a killer (preferably sane) from among the cast of characters. Applying fair-play detection to a case of apparently random murders was as tough a challenge as a mystery writer could take on, and when done really well—say, in Ellery Queen's *Cat of Many Tails* (1949), Agatha Christie's *The ABC Murders* (1936), or Philip MacDonald's *The Mystery of the Dead Police* (British title *X v. REX (1933)*); or in a more recent time, Richard Neely's *The Walter Syndrome* (1970) or Bill Pronzini and Barry N. Malzberg's *The Running of Beasts* (1976)—the result could be classic.

Now, of course, just as serial killers are sadly plentiful in real life, rather than a horrifying aberration as in Jack the Ripper's London, every other novel seems to involve one. The big-city-cop-versus-psychopathic-killer plot, while still potent if done well, has become one of the most cliched situations in the genre, and even a writer with a new twist on it is likely to encounter sales resistance from a great many readers. Justifiable concerns have been raised over the excessive fictional depiction of violence toward women, who comprise most of the victims of serial killers (certainly in fiction and, I would think, in fact as well).

Still, some recent serial killer novels prove that this particular mystery subgenre remains viable if done with style and originality. Below are four examples.

**** William Bayer: *Wallflower,* Villard, $20. Ironically, given the above remarks, the best of the group is the one closest to the cop-vs.-psycho tradition, but it has ample original twists and Bayer is a master of the type. New York cop Frank Janek, who earlier appeared in the author's *Switch* (1984) is called back from a European vacation when his goddaughter becomes the victim of the so-called Happy Families killer. The whodunit lasts until about midway, but the fascinating case history and inverted detection of the second half keep the reader's interest.

*** Paul Levine: *Night Vision,* Bantam, price unknown. Miami lawyer Jake Lassiter, who debuted memorably in *To Speak for the*

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Dead (1990) is appointed to investigate a series of strangulation murders of women who subscribe to an online matchmaking service. Levine makes this a true whodunit in the Golden-Age style. As in his debut, there is scintillating writing, plenty of humor, and strong pure readability. Also as before, Levine does not make some of his gaudier plot turns believable—for example, I don't think Lassiter's decision to leave a major criminal investigation for an interlude in Britain is completely credible, and there is at least one absurd coincidence in the membership of CompuMate. In his extremely downbeat picture of Florida—no tourist handout here—Levine may overdo the JDM-style preaching, but quibbles aside, he is one of the funniest and most promising writers to enter the crime fiction genre in recent years.

*** Richard Nehrbass: *A Perfect Death for Hollywood,* Harper Collins, $18.95. In a Hollywood only slightly more attractive than Paul Levine's Florida, private eye Vic Eton investigates a crime that clearly must be the work of a psychopathic sex killer: the body of a young prostitute who has been crucified is found under the H on the HOLLYWOOD sign, and soon a second (but *male)* victim is found in similar condition under the O. Nehrbass's first novel does a fine job with its characters and background, and the well-constructed plot has its full quota of surprises. Eton's second case will be worth watching for.

*** Bill Crider: *Blood Marks,* St. Martin's, $18.95. Crider's Houston serial killer has the distinction of never following the same *modus operandi* and almost never leaving a clue at the remarkably tidy crime scenes. The novel becomes a closed-circle whodunit when it becomes obvious that one of newcomer Casey Buckland's friends around the apartment-building pool is the killer—and is targeting her as the next victim. Crider, in a more explicitly violent novel than the gentle small-town stories he is best known for, both keeps the pages flying and gets maximum mileage out of only three suspects.

*** Robert Campbell: *In a Pig's Eye,* Pocket, $19.00. Chicago sewer inspector and politico Jimmy Flannery, newly promoted to Committeeman of the Twenty-Seventh Ward, turns detective for the eighth time when a member of his exercise group goes down to do leglifts and never gets up. This is another solid entry in one of the most entertaining series extant.

*** E.X. Giroux: *A Death for a Dancing Doll,* St. Martin's, $17.95. The ninth book about barrister Robert Forsythe and his secretary/Watson Abigail Sanderson finds them interrupting a Canadian vacation to look into the tragic affairs of an odd family. The novel is unusual among whodunits in including children among the victims. Giroux, who used to write as Doris Shannon, plays the Golden Age game of classical detection with the best of its current practitioners.

*** Michael Bond: *Monsieur Pamplemousse Rests His Case,* Fawcett

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Columbine, $17. The "gastronomic mysteries" about Monsieur Pamplemousse, formerly of the *Surete* and now a food inspector for a restaurant guide, are clearly not for every taste, but many devotees of food, wine, and language will enjoy them. There's plenty of humor, ranging from a charming selection of euphemisms for death (including "patient failed to fulfil his wellness potential" and "a non-decision-making mode") to an interlude of bedroom farce that suggests Feydeau and Clouseau more than Poirot and Simenon. Some will grumble that the plot is thin to support a book and that the mystery-writer suspects are not well-enough differentiated as characters, but Pamplemousse's detection is inspired, including the elucidation of one of the most unlikely dying messages in fictional annals.

*** Elizabeth Rossiter: *The Lemon Garden,* Carroll & Graf, $18.95. First published in Great Britain in 1983, this is a very good specimen of romantic suspense, at times recalling the older (and usually derisive) term "Had I But Known"—on occasion, the first-person heroine comes very close to using those very words. Movie actress Joanna Fleming, trying to regain her memory after an accident, is the target of faceless menace. The Italian locale is nicely realized; there is a fine cast of suspects, including two possible candidates for hero; and the whole job is readable and expert.

** Sharyn McCrumb: *Missing Susan,* Ballantine, $17. The latest novel about forensic anthropologist Elizabeth MacPherson exemplifies the travelogue mystery in its purest form. Most of the novel is a description of a true-crime tour of England and Wales. Comprising a thin crime plot reminiscent of a Roadrunner cartoon is the murder-for-hire assignment of tour guide Rowan Rover (whose name at least is patterned after crime writer Martin Fido, credited in an acknowledgement). Of several real-life cases discussed, most attention, including a solution theory, is given the 1860 Constance Kent case. McCrumb is such a talented and amusing writer, the account is quite enjoyable, but the series' tendency to shun mystery and detection has finally gone too far.

** Elmore Leonard: *Maximum Bob,* Delacorte, $20. The title character is obnoxious Florida judge Bob Gibbs, known for his harsh sentences and bigoted views. The jacket blurb inaccurately suggests a whodunit (who put the alligator in the judge's backyard and who fired shots at his house?), but it's nothing of the kind—the investigators, including likable probation officer Kathy Diaz Baker, may be in the dark, but the reader isn't. For all Leonard's undeniable skill, this is a distinctly sub-par example of his work: most of the characters just aren't interesting enough to carry the sprawling plot.

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a *NEW* short story by

JAMES POWELL

A grim and hilarious Christmas crime-fantasy manufactured ... where else but in the diabolical toy factory of James Powell's imagination.

SANTA'S WAY

by JAMES POWELL

Lieutenant Field parked behind the Animal Protective League van. The night was cold, the stars so bright he could almost taste them. Warmer constellations of tree lights decorated the dark living rooms on both sides of the street. Field turned up his coat collar. Then he followed the footprints in the snow across the lawn and up to the front door of the house where a uniformed officer stood shuffling his feet against the weather.

Captain Fountain was on the telephone in the front hallway and listening so hard he didn't notice Field come in. "Yes, Commissioner," he said. "Yes, sir, Commissioner." Then he laid a hand over the mouthpiece, looked up at a light fixture on the ceiling, and demanded, "Why me, Lord? Why me?" (The department took a dim view of men talking to themselves on duty. So Fountain always addressed furniture or fixtures. He confided much to urinals. They all knew how hard-done-by Fountain was.) Turning to repeat his question to the hatrack he saw Field. "Sorry to bring you out on this of all nights, Roy," he said. He pointed into the living room and added cryptically, "Check out the fireplace, why don't you?" Then he went back to listening.

Field crossed to the cold hearth. There were runs of blood down the sides of the flue. Large, red, star-shaped spatters decorated the ashes.

© *1991 by James Powell.*

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A woman's muffled voice said, "I heard somebody coming down the chimney." A blonde in her late thirties sitting in a wing chair in the corner, her face buried in a handkerchief. She looked up at Field with red-rimmed eyes. "After I called you people I even shouted up and told him you were on your way. But he kept on coming."

Captain Fountain was off the telephone. From the doorway he said, "So Miss Doreen Moore here stuck her pistol up the flue and fired away."

"Ka-pow, ka-pow, ka-pow," said the woman, making her hand into a pistol and, in Field's opinion, mimicking the recoil quite well. But he didn't quite grasp the situation until men emerged from the darkness on the other side of the picture window and reached up to steady eight tiny reindeer being lowered down from the roof in a large sling.

"Oh, no!" said Field.

"Oh, yes," said Fountain. "Come see for yourself."

Field followed him upstairs to the third-floor attic where the grim-faced Animal Protective League people, their job done, were backing down the ladder from the trap door in the roof.

Field and Fountain stood out on the sloping shingles under the stars. Christmas music came from the radio in the dashboard of the pickle-dish sleigh straddling the ridge of the roof. Close at hand was Santa, both elbows on the lip of the chimney, his body below the armpits and most of his beard out of sight down the hole. He was quite dead. The apples in his cheeks were Granny Smiths, green and hard.

Only the week before Field had watched the PBS documentary "Santa's Way." Its final minutes were still fresh in his mind. Santa in an old tweed jacket sat at his desk at the Toy Works backed by a window that looked right down onto the factory floor busy with elves. Mrs. Claus, her eyes on her knitting, smiled and nodded at his words and rocked nearby. "Starting out all we could afford to leave was a candy cane and an orange," Santa had said. "The elves made the candy canes and it was up to me to beg or borrow the oranges. Well, one day the United Fruit people said, 'Old timer, you make it a Chiquita banana and we'll supply them free and make a sizable donation to the elf scholarship fund.' But commercializing Christmas wasn't Santa's way. So we made do with the orange. And look at us now." He lowered his hairy white head modestly. "The

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Toy Works is running three shifts making sleds and dolls and your paint boxes with your yellows, blues, and reds. The new cargo dirigible lets us restock the sleigh in flight." Santa gave the camera a sadder look. "Mind you, there's a down side," he acknowledged. "We've strip-mined and deforested the hell out of the North Pole for the sticks and lumps of coal we give our naughty little clients. And our bond rating isn't as good as it used to be. Still, when the bankers say, 'Why not charge a little something, a token payment for each toy?' I always answer, 'That isn't Santa's way.' "

An urgent voice from the sleigh radio intruded on Field's remembering. "We interrupt this program for a news bulletin," it said. "Santa is dead. We repeat, Santa is dead. The jolly old gentleman was shot several times in the chimney earlier this evening. More details when they are available." At that late hour all good little boys and girls were in bed. Otherwise, Field knew, the announcer would've said, "Antasay is eadday," and continued in pig Latin.

Field stood there glumly watching the street below where the A.P.L. people were chasing after a tiny reindeer which had escaped while being loaded into the van. Lights had come on all over the neighborhood and faces were appearing in windows. After a moment, he turned his attention to the corpse.

But Fountain was feeling the cold. "Roy," he said impatiently, "Santa came down the wrong chimney. The woman panicked. Ka-pow, ka-pow, ka-pow! Cut and dried."

Field shook his head. "Rooftops are like fingerprints," he reminded the Captain. "No two are alike. Santa wouldn't make a mistake like—" He frowned, leaned forward, and put his face close to the corpse's.

"It wasn't just the smell of whiskey on his lips, Miss Moore," said Field. "You see, if Santa'd been going down the chimney his beard would've been pushed up over his face. But it was stuck down inside. Miss Moore, when you shot Santa he was on his way up that chimney."

The woman twisted the handkerchief between her fingers. "All right," she snapped. Then in a quieter voice she said, "All right, Nicky and I go back a long way. Right around here is end of the line for his Christmas deliveries. I'll bet you didn't know that."

Field had guessed as much. Last year when his kids wondered why the treat they left on a tray under the tree was never touched

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he had suggested maybe Santa was milk-and-cookied out by the time he got to their house.

"Anyway," continued Miss Moore, "Nicky'd always drop by afterwards for a drink and some laughs and one thing would lead to another. But I'm not talking one-night stands," she insisted. "We took trips. We spent time together whenever he could get away. He said he loved Mrs. Claus but she was a saint. And I wasn't a saint, he said, and he loved me for that. And I was crazy about him. But tonight he tried to walk out on me. So I shot him."

In the distance Field heard the police helicopter come to take the sleigh on the roof to Impound.

Fountain said, "Better get Miss Moore down to the station before this place is crawling with reporters. I'll wait for the boys with the flue-extractor rig."

Field turned on his car radio to catch any late-breaking developments. "O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum, how beautiful your branches!" sang a small choir. They drove without speaking for a while. Then out of nowhere the woman said, "You know that business about Nicky having a belly that shook like a bowl full of jelly? Well, that was just the poet going for a cheap rhyme. Nicky took care of himself. He exercised. He jogged. And he had this twinkle in his eye that'd just knock my socks off."

"I heard about the twinkle," Field admitted.

"But underneath it all there was this deep sadness," she said. "It wasn't just the fund-raising, the making the rounds every year, hat in hand, for money to keep the North Pole going. And it wasn't the elves, although they weren't always that easy to deal with. 'They can be real short, Doreen,' he told me once. 'Hey, I know elves are short, Nicky. Give me credit for some brains,' I said. He said, 'No, Doreen, I mean abrupt.'

"One time I asked him why he got so low and he said, 'Doreen, when I look all those politicians, bankers, lawyers, and captains of industry in the eye do you know who I see staring back at me? Those same naughty little boys and girls I gave the sticks and lumps of coal to. Where did I go wrong, Doreen? How did they end up running the show?'

"Well, a while back Nicky got this great idea how he could walk away from the whole business. Mr. Santa franchises. He'd auction the whole operation off country by country. Mr. Santa U.S.A. gets exclusive rights to give free toys to American kids and so on, country

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by country. 'And the elves'd take care of Mrs. Claus,' he said. 'They love her. She's a saint. And with the money I'll raise you and me'll buy a boat and sail away. We'll live off my patented Mr. Santa accessories. You know, my wide belt and the metered tape recorder of my laugh at a buck a 'ho!' "

Suddenly a voice on the radio said, "We now take you to New York where Leviathan Cribbage, elf observer to the United Nations, is about to hold a press conference." After the squeal of a microphone being adjusted downward a considerable distance, a high-pitched little voice said, "The High Council of Elves has asked me to issue the following statement: 'Cast down as we are by the murder of our great leader, Santa Claus, we are prepared, as a memorial to the man and his work, to continue to manufacture and distribute toys on the night before Christmas. In return we ask that our leader's murderer, whom we know to be in police custody, be turned over to elf justice. If the murderer is not in our hands within twenty-four hours the Toy Works at the North Pole will be shut down permanently.' " The room erupted into a hubbub of voices.

"Turn me over to elf justice?" said Miss Moore with a shudder. "That doesn't sound so hot."

"It won't happen," Field assured her as he parked the car. "Even a politician couldn't get away with a stunt like that."

Four detectives were crowded around the squad room television set. Field took Miss Moore into his office. Gesturing her into a chair, he sat down at his desk and said, "Now where were we?"

"With a buck a 'ho!' and me waiting there tonight with my bags packed," she said. "And here comes Nicky down the chimney. 'Doreen,' he says, 'I've only got a minute. I've still deliveries to make. Honey, I told Mrs. Claus about us. She's forgiven me, as I knew she would. But I can't see you again.'

" 'What about the Mr. Santa auction?' said I.

" 'Some auction,' he said. 'Everybody wanted America or Germany. Nobody wanted to be the Bangladeshi or the Ethiopian Mr. Santa. Crazy, isn't it? Everybody wants to load up the kids who've already got everything when giving to kids with nothing is the real fun.' Then he looked at me and said, 'It got me thinking about where I went wrong, Doreen. Maybe I should have given my naughty little clients toys, too. Maybe then they wouldn't have grown up into the kinds of people they did. Anyway, I'm going to give it a try. From

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now on I'll be Santa of all the children, naughty or nice. Goodbye, Doreen,' he said and turned to go.

"That's when I pulled out the revolver I keep around because I'm alone so much. I was tired of men who put their careers ahead of their women. I swore I'd kill him if he tried to leave. He went 'ho-ho-ho!' and took the gun out of my hand. He knew I couldn't shoot. I burst into tears. He gathered me in his arms and gave me a goodbye kiss. Emptying the bullets onto the rug, he tossed the pistol aside and walked over to the fireplace. 'You're a nice girl, Doreen,' he said with a twinkle in his eye. 'Don't let anybody ever tell you different.' But just before he ducked his head under the mantel I saw the twinkle flicker."

"Flicker?" asked Field.

"Like he was thinking maybe he'd figured me wrong," she explained. "Like maybe I'd reload the gun. Well, up the chimney he went, hauling ass real fast. And suddenly I was down on my knees pushing those bullets back into that pistol, furious that I'd wasted my whole life just to be there any time that old geezer in his red wool suit with that unfashionably wide belt could slip his collar and be with me, furious that he was dumping me just so he could give toys to naughty little boys and girls. I was trembling with rage. But every bullet I dropped I picked up again. When I'd gotten them all I went over and emptied the pistol up the chimney. Then I called you people."

Field's telephone rang. "Roy," said his wife, "I just heard the news about Santa. Roy, there aren't any presents under our tree. What are we going to do?"

"Lois, I can't talk now," said Field. "Don't worry. I'll think of something." He hung up the phone. Maybe if he worked all night he could cobble together some toys out of that scrap lumber in the basement.

Fountain was signaling from the doorway. He had an efficient-looking young woman with him. Field stepped outside. "Roy, this is Agent Mountain, Federal Witness Protection Program," he said. "I just got off the phone with the Commissioner. We're not bringing charges."

"Captain, we could be talking premeditated murder here," insisted Field, telling the part about her putting the bullets back into the pistol.

Fountain shrugged. "You want a trial? You want all the nice little boys and girls finding out that Santa was murdered and why? No

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way, Roy. She walks. But we can't let those damn knee-highs get her."

"You mean elves?" asked Field, who had never heard elves referred to in that derogatory way before.

"You got it," said Fountain. "So Agent Mountain's here to relocate her, give her a whole new identity.

Agent Mountain waved through the door at Doreen Moore. "Hi, honey," she said cheerily. "It looks like it's back to being a brunette."

Field put on his overcoat and closed his office door behind him. He stopped for a moment in front of the squad room television set. Somebody from the State Department was saying, "Peter, let's clear up one misconception right now. Elves are not short genetically. Their growth has been stunted by smoking and other acts of depravity associated with a perverse lifestyle. Can we let such twisted creatures hold our children's happiness hostage? I think not. I refer the second part of your question to General Frost."

A large man in white camouflage placed a plan of the Toy Works at the North Pole on an easel. "In case of a military strike against them, the elves intend to destroy the Toy Works with explosive charges set here, here, and here," he said, tapping with a pointer. "As I speak, our airborne forces, combined with crack RCMP dogsled units, have moved to neutralize—"

Field's phone was ringing. He hurried back to his office. "Hey, Lieutenant," said Impound, "We found presents in Santa's sleigh, some with your kids' names on them. Want to come by and pick them up?"

Field came in with the presents trapped between his chin and his forearm, closing the door quietly behind him. His wife was rattling around in the kitchen. He didn't call out to her, not wanting to wake the children. The light from the kitchen would be enough to put the presents under the tree. He was halfway across the living room when the lights came on. His children were staring down at him from the top of the stairs. Zack and Lesley, the eldest, exchanged wise glances. Charlotte was seven. She'd lost her first baby tooth that afternoon and her astonished mouth had a gap in it.

Field smiled up at them. "Santa got held up in traffic," he lied. "So he deputized a bunch of us as Santa's little helpers to deliver his presents." Charlotte received this flimsy nonsense with large,

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perplexed eyes. It was the first time he had ever told her anything she didn't believe instantly.

Ordering the children back to bed, Field went into the kitchen. Lois was watching a round-table discussion called "Life After Santa" on the little television set. When he told her about the presents from Impound she said, "Thank God." He didn't tell her what had just happened with the kids. Maybe one of these days he'd be able to sit down and give them the straight scoop, how there really had been this nice guy called Santa Claus who went around in a sleigh pulled by reindeer giving kids presents because he loved them, so, of course, we had to shoot him.

He turned on the kettle to make himself a cup of instant coffee and sat down beside his wife. On the screen a celebrated economist was saying, "Of course, we'll have to find an alternate energy source. Our entire industrial base has always depended on Santa's sticks and lumps of coal."

"But what a golden opportunity to end our kids' dependence on free toys," observed a former National Security advisor. "That's always smelled like socialism to me. Kids have to learn there's no free lunch. We should hand the Toy Works over to private enterprise. I hear Von Clausewitz Industries are interested in getting into toys."

"What about distribution?" asked someone else.

"Maybe we could talk the department stores into selling toys for a week or two before Christmas."

"Selling toys?" asked someone in disbelief.

The National Security advisor smiled. "We can hardly expect the Von Clausewitz people to pick up the tab. No, the toys'll have to be sold. But the play of the marketplace will hold prices—"

Field heard a sound. Someone had raised an upstairs window. Footsteps headed down the hall toward the children's rooms. He took the stairs two at a time, reaching the top with his service revolver drawn. Someone was standing in the dark corner by Charlotte's door. Crouching, pistol at the ready, Field snapped on the hall light. "Freeze!" he shouted.

The woman turned and gave him a questioning look. She had immense rose-gossamer wings of a swallow-tail cut sprouting from her shoulder-blades and a gown like white enamel shimmering with jewels. He didn't recognize who it was behind the surgical mask until she tugged at the wrists of her latex gloves, took a shiny quarter from the coin dispenser at her waist and stepped into Charlotte's room.

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Field came out of his crouch slowly. Returning his weapon to its holster he went back down to the kitchen. He turned off the kettle, found the whiskey bottle in the cupboard and poured himself a drink with a trembling hand. "Lois," he said, "I almost shot the Tooth Fairy."

"Oh, Roy," she scolded in a tired voice.

On the television screen someone said, "Of course, we'll need a fund to provide toys for the children of the deserving poor."

"Don't you mean 'the deserving children of the poor'?" someone asked.

" 'Deserving children of the deserving poor,' " suggested another.

Lois shook her head. "Store-bought toys, Roy?" she asked. "We've got mortgage payments, car payments, Lesley's orthodontist, and saving for the kids' college. How can we afford store-bought toys?"

It'd been a hard day. He didn't want to talk about next year's toys. "Lois, please—" he started to say a bit snappishly. But here the program broke for a commercial and a voice said, "Hey, Mom, hey, kids, is Dad getting a little short? (And we don't mean abrupt). Why not send him along to see the folks at Tannenbaum Savings and Loan. All our offices have been tastefully decorated for the season. And there's one near you. So remember—" here a choir chimed in "—Owe Tannenbaum, Owe Tannenbaum, how beautiful their branches!"

DETECTIVERSE

GARROTED IN THE GARRET

by MARY T. DANIELS

The wife of an artist named Seth,
Deceived by him, plotted his death.
She strangled the liar
With his own picture wire,
So now he can't even draw breath.

© 1991 by Mary T. Daniels.

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1991 EQMM READERS AWARD

1991 is the seventh year of the EQMM Readers Award, and all the more special for being our 50th Anniversary year. We hope you will vote in greater numbers and that you will look back through all thirteen issues when making your selection. To insure that you're not overlooking a story of special merit, please take a moment to consult our complete index in the back pages of this issue, listing the authors and their stories.

This year we're trying a different approach. Our ballot includes a space for your favorite original story and, because we've reprinted a number of classic stories to celebrate our fiftieth year of publication, a space for your favorite reprint as well.

Your ballot is on the back of this page. Write the story of your choice and the author's name in the space provided under each heading. If you can't recall a story title or its author, describe the plot as briefly as you can. Return the ballot itself (no copies will be accepted) to the address on page ninety-eight postmarked no later than the December 31 deadline.

We very much appreciate your participation. Much is said by artists about being celebrated by their peers, and there is definite worth in that, of course, but we believe that writers being celebrated by readers is the ultimate gratification.

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The 1991 EQMM Readers Award-winning story will be announced in the May 1992 issue. If you would like to learn the results of the voting before the May issue goes to subscribers and newsstands, send a standard-size envelope with your name and address (include it with your ballot, if you like) and you will hear back from us by late January.

My favorite original story selection for the 1991 EQMM Readers Award is:

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an Inspector Maigret reprint by

GEORGES SIMENON

A classic tale of the great manhunter and his understanding wife and what happened to them on Christmas Day when, contrary to his usual methods, Maigret did most of his sleuthing from the depths of his easy chair, while sipping Alsatian plum brandy and smoking his inevitable pipe. This tale is a marvelous companion piece to last year's Christmas reprint by Simenon, "A Matter of Life and Death," which proved so popular in our annual Readers Award poll (see page 97 for this year's ballot) . . .

MAIGRET'S CHRISTMAS

by GEORGES SIMENON

The routine never varied. When Maigret went to bed he must have muttered his usual, "Tomorrow morning I shall sleep late." And Mme. Maigret, who over the years should have learned to pay no attention to such casual phrases, had taken him at his word this Christmas day.

It was not quite daylight when he heard her stirring cautiously. He forced himself to breathe regularly and deeply as though he were still asleep. It was like a game. She inched toward the edge of the bed with animal stealth, pausing after each movement to make sure she had not awakened him. He waited anxiously for the inevitable finale, the moment when the bedspring, relieved of her weight, would spring back into place with a faint sigh.

She picked up her clothing from the chair and turned the knob of the bathroom door so slowly that it seemed to take an eternity. It was not until she had reached the distant fastness of the kitchen that she resumed her normal movements.

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Maigret had fallen asleep again. Not deeply, nor for long. Long enough, however, for a confused and disturbing dream. Waking, he could not remember what it was, but he knew it was disturbing because he still felt vaguely uneasy.

The crack between the window drapes which never quite closed became a strip of pale, hard daylight. He waited a while longer, lying on his back with his eyes open, savoring the fragrance of fresh coffee. Then he heard the apartment door open and close, and he knew that Mme. Maigret was hurrying downstairs to buy him hot croissants from the bakery at the corner of the Rue Amelot.

He never ate in the morning. His breakfast consisted of black coffee. But his wife clung to her ritual: on Sundays and holidays he was supposed to lie in bed until mid-morning while she went out for croissants.

He got up, stepped into his slippers, put on his dressing gown, and drew the curtains. He knew he was doing wrong. His wife would be heartbroken. But while he was willing to make almost any sacrifice to please her, he simply could not stay in bed longer than he felt like it.

It was not snowing. It was nonsense, of course, for a man past fifty to be disappointed because there was no snow on Christmas morning; but then middle-aged people never have as much sense as young folks sometimes imagine.

A dirty, turbid sky hung low over the rooftops. The Boulevard Richard-Lenoir was completely deserted. The words *Fils et Cie., Bonded Warehouses* on the sign above the porte-cochére across the street stood out as black as mourning crêpe. The *F.* for some strange reason, seemed particularly dismal.

He heard his wife moving about in the kitchen again. She came into the dining room on tiptoe, as though he were still asleep instead of looking out the window. He glanced at his watch on the night table. It was only ten past eight.

The night before the Maigrets had gone to the theatre. They would have loved dropping in for a snack at some restaurant, like everyone else on Christmas Eve, but all tables were reserved for *Réveillon* supper. So they had walked home arm in arm, getting in a few minutes before midnight. Thus they hadn't long to wait before exchanging presents.

He got a pipe, as usual. Her present was an electric coffee pot, the latest model that she had wanted so much, and, not to break with tradition, a dozen finely embroidered handkerchiefs.

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Still looking out the window, Maigret absently filled his new pipe. The shutters were still closed on some of the windows across the boulevard. Not many people were up. Here and there a light burned in a window, probably left by children who had leaped out of bed at the crack of dawn to rush for their presents under the Christmas tree.

In the quiet Maigret apartment the morning promised to be a lazy one for just the two of them. Maigret would loiter in his dressing gown until quite late. He would not even shave. He would dawdle in the kitchen, talking to his wife while she put the lunch on the stove. Just the two of them.

He wasn't sad exactly, but his dream—which he couldn't remember—had left him jumpy. Or perhaps it wasn't his dream. Perhaps it was Christmas. He had to be extra-careful on Christmas Day, careful of his words, the way Mme. Maigret had been careful of her movements in getting out of bed. Her nerves, too, were especially sensitive on Christmas.

Oh, well, why think of all that? He would just be careful to say nothing untoward. He would be careful not to look out of the window when the neighborhood children began to appear on the sidewalks with their Christmas toys.

All the houses in the street had children. Or almost all. The street would soon echo to the shrill blast of toy horns, the roll of toy drums, and the crack of toy pistols. The little girls were probably already cradling their new dolls.

A few years ago he had proposed more or less at random: "Why don't we take a little trip for Christmas?"

"Where?" she had replied with her infallible common sense.

Where, indeed? Whom would they visit? They had no relatives except her sister who lived too far away. And why spend Christmas in some second-rate country inn, or at a hotel in some strange town?

Oh, well, he'd feel better after he had his coffee. He was never at his best until he'd drunk his first cup of coffee and lit his first pipe.

Just as he was reaching for the knob, the door opened noiselessly and Mme. Maigret appeared carrying a tray. She looked at the empty bed, then turned her disappointed eyes upon her husband. She was on the verge of tears.

"You got up!" She looked as though she had been up for hours herself, every hair in place, a picture of neatness in her crisp, clean apron. "And I was so happy about serving your breakfast in bed."

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He had tried a hundred times, as subtly as he could, to make her understand that he didn't like eating breakfast in bed. It made him uncomfortable. It made him feel like an invalid or a senile old gaffer. But for Mme. Maigret breakfast in bed was the symbol of leisure and luxury, the ideal way to start Sunday or a holiday.

"Don't you want to go back to bed?"

No, he did not. Decidedly not. He hadn't the courage.

"Then come to breakfast in the kitchen. And Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas!—You're not angry?"

They were in the dining room. He surveyed the silver tray on a corner of the table, the steaming cup of coffee, the golden-brown croissants. He put down his pipe and ate a croissant to please his wife, but he remained standing, looking out the window.

"It's snowing."

It wasn't real snow. It was a fine white dust sifting down from the sky, but it reminded Maigret that when he was a small boy he used to stick out his tongue to lick up a few of the tiny flakes.

His gaze focused on the entrance to the building across the street, next door to the warehouse. Two women had just come out, both bareheaded. One of them, a blonde of about thirty, had thrown a coat over her shoulders without stopping to slip her arms into the sleeves. The other, a brunette, older and thinner, was hugging a shawl.

The blonde seemed to hesitate, ready to turn back. Her slim little companion was insistent and Maigret had the impression that she was pointing up toward his window. The appearance of the concierge in the doorway behind them seemed to tip the scales in favor of the little brunette. The blonde looked back apprehensively, then crossed the street.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing. Two women."

"What are they doing?"

"I think they're coming here."

The two women had stopped in the middle of the street and were looking up in the direction of the Maigret apartment.

"I hope they're not coming here to bother you on Christmas Day. My housework's not even done." Nobody would have guessed it. There wasn't a speck of dust on any of the polished furniture. "Are you sure they're coming here?"

"We'll soon find out."

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To be on the safe side, he went to comb his hair, brush his teeth, and splash a little water on his face. He was still in his room, relighting his pipe, when he heard the doorbell. Mme. Maigret was evidently putting up a strong hedgehog defense, for it was some time before she came to him.

"They insist on speaking to you," she whispered. "They claim it's very important and they need advice. I know one of them."

"Which one?"

"The skinny little one, Mlle. Doncoeur. She lives across the street on the same floor as ours. She's a very nice person and she does embroidery for a firm in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré. I sometimes wonder if she isn't in love with you."

"Why?"

"Because she works near the window, and when you leave the house in the morning she sometimes gets up to watch you go down the street."

"How old is she?"

"Forty-five to fifty. Aren't you getting dressed?"

Doesn't a man have the right to lounge in his dressing gown, even if people come to bother him at 8:30 on Christmas morning? Well, he'd compromise. He'd put his trousers on underneath the robe.

The two women were standing when he walked into the dining room.

"Excuse me, mesdames—"

Perhaps Mme. Maigret was right. Mlle. Doncoeur did not blush; she paled, smiled, lost her smile, smiled again. She opened her mouth to speak but said nothing.

The blonde, on the other hand, was perfectly composed. She said with a touch of humor: "Coming here wasn't my idea."

"Would you sit down, please?"

Maigret noticed that the blonde was wearing a housedress under her coat and that her legs were bare. Mlle. Doncoeur was dressed as though for church.

"You perhaps wonder at our boldness in coming to you like this," Mlle. Doncoeur said finally, choosing her words carefully. "Like everyone in the neighborhood, we are honored to have such a distinguished neighbor—" She paused, blushed, and stared at the tray. "We're keeping you from your breakfast."

"I've finished, I'm at your service."

"Something happened in our building last night, or rather this morning, which was so unusual that I felt it was our duty to speak

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to you about it immediately. Madame Martin did not want to disturb you, but I told her—"

"You also live across the street, Madame Martin?"

"Yes, Monsieur." Madame Martin was obviously unhappy at being forced to take this step. Mlle. Doncoeur, however, was now fully wound up.

"We live on the same floor, just across from your windows." She blushed again, as if she were making a confession. "Monsieur Martin is often out of town, which is natural enough since he is a traveling salesman. For the past two months their little girl has been in bed, as a result of a silly accident—"

Maigret turned politely to the blonde. "You have a daughter?"

"Well, not a daughter exactly. She's our niece. Her mother died two years ago and she's been living with us ever since. The girl broke her leg on the stairs. She should have been up and about after six weeks, but there were complications."

"Your husband is on the road at present?"

"He should be in Bergerac."

"I'm listening, Mlle. Doncoeur."

Mme. Maigret had detoured through the bathroom to regain the kitchen. The clatter of pots and pans had resumed. Maigret stared through the window at the leaden sky.

"I got up early this morning as usual," said Mlle. Doncoeur, "to go to first mass."

"And you did go to church?"

"Yes. I stayed for three masses. I got home about 7:30 and prepared my breakfast. You may have seen the light in my window."

Maigret's gesture indicated he had not been watching.

"I was in a hurry to take a few goodies to Colette. It's very sad for a child to spend Christmas in bed. Colette is Madame Martin's niece."

"How old is she?"

"Seven. Isn't that right, Madame Martin?"

"She'll be seven in January."

"So at eight o'clock I knocked at the door of their apartment—"

"I wasn't up," the blonde interrupted. "I sometimes sleep rather late."

"As I was saying, I knocked. Madame Martin kept me waiting for a moment while she slipped on her negligee. I had my arms full, and I asked if I could take my presents in to Colette."

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Maigret noted that the blonde was making a mental inventory of the apartment, stopping occasionally to dart a sharp, suspicious glance in his direction.

"We opened the door to her room together—"

"The child has a room of her own?"

"Yes. There are two bedrooms in the apartment, a dressing room, a kitchen, and a dining room. But I must tell you—No, I'm getting ahead of myself. We had just opened the door and since the room was dark, Madame Martin had switched on the light—"

"Colette was awake?"

"Yes. It was easy to see she'd been awake for some time, waiting. You know how children are on Christmas morning. If she could use her legs, she would certainly have got up long since to see what Father Christmas had brought her. Perhaps another child would have called out. But Colette is already a little lady. She's much older than her age. She thinks a lot."

Now Madame Martin was looking out the window. Maigret tried to guess which apartment was hers. It must be the last one to the right, the one with the two lighted windows.

"I wished her a Merry Christmas," Mlle. Doncoeur continued. "I said to her, and these were my exact words, 'Darling, look what Father Christmas left in my apartment for you.' "

Madame Martin was clasping and unclasping her fingers.

"And do you know what she answered me, without even looking to see what I'd brought? They were only trifles, anyhow. She said, 'I saw him.'

" 'Whom did you see?'

" 'Father Christmas.'

" 'When did you see him?' I asked. 'Where?'

" 'Right here, last night. He came to my room.'

"That's exactly what she said, isn't it, Madame Martin? With any other child, we would have smiled. But as I told you, Colette is already a little lady. She doesn't joke. I said, 'How could you see him, since it was dark?'

" 'He had a light.'

" 'You mean he turned on the electricity?'

" 'No. He had a flashlight. Look, Mama Loraine.'

"I must tell you that the little girl calls Madame Martin 'Mama,' which is natural enough, since her own mother is dead and Madame Martin has been taking her place."

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The monologue had become a confused buzzing in Maigret's ears. He had not drunk his second cup of coffee and his pipe had gone out. He asked without conviction: "Did she really see someone?"

"Yes, Monsieur l'Inspector. And that's why I insisted that Madame Martin come to speak to you. Colette did see someone and she proved it to us. With a sly little smile she threw back the bedsheet and showed us a magnificent doll, a beautiful big doll she was cuddling and which I swear was not in the house yesterday."

"You didn't give your niece a doll, Madame Martin?"

"I was going to give her one, but mine was not nearly as nice. I got it yesterday afternoon at the Galeries, and I was holding it behind me this morning when we came into her room."

"In other words, someone *did* come into your apartment last night?"

"That's not all," said Mlle. Doncoeur quickly; she was not to be stopped. "Colette never tells lies. She's not a child who imagines things. And when we questioned her, she said the man was certainly Father Christmas because he wore a white beard and a bright red coat."

"At what time did she wake up?"

"She doesn't know—sometime during the night. She opened her eyes because she thought she saw a light. And there was a light, shining on the floor near the fireplace."

"I can't understand it," sighed Madame Martin. "Unless my husband has some explanation."

But Mlle. Doncoeur was not to be diverted from her story. It was obvious that she was the one who had questioned the child, just as she was the one who had thought of Maigret. She resumed:

"Colette said, 'Father Christmas was squatting on the floor, and he was bending over, as though he were working at something.' "

"She wasn't frightened?"

"No. She just watched him. This morning she told us he was busy making a hole in the floor. She thought he wanted to go through the floor to visit the people downstairs—that's the Delormes who have a little boy of three—because the chimney was too narrow. The man must have sensed she was watching him, because he got up, came over to the bed, and gave Colette the big doll. Then he put his finger to his lips."

"Did she see him leave?"

"Yes."

"Through the floor?"

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"No, by the door."

"Into what room does this door open?"

"Directly into the outside hall. There is another door that opens into the apartment, but the hall door is like a private entrance because the room used to be rented separately."

"Wasn't the door locked?"

"Of course," Madame Martin intervened. "I wouldn't let the child sleep in a room that wasn't locked from the outside."

"Then the door was forced?"

"Probably. I don't know. Mlle. Doncoeur immediately suggested we come to see you."

"Did you find a hole in the floor?"

Madame Martin shrugged wearily, but Mlle. Doncoeur answered for her.

"Not a hole exactly, but you could see that the floorboards had been moved."

"Tell me, Madame Martin, have you any idea what might have been hidden under the flooring?"

"No, Monsieur."

"How long have you lived in this apartment?"

"Since my marriage, five years ago."

"And this room was part of the apartment then?"

"Yes."

"You know who lived there before you?"

"My husband. He's thirty-eight. He was thirty-three when we were married, and he had his own furniture then. He liked to have his own home to come back to when he returned to Paris from the road."

"Do you think he might have wanted to surprise Colette?"

"He is six or seven hundred kilometers from here."

"Where did you say?"

"In Bergerac. His itinerary is planned in advance and he rarely deviates from his schedule."

"For what firm does he travel?"

"He covers the central and southwest territory for Zenith watches. It's an important line, as you probably know. He has a very good job."

"There isn't a finer man on earth!" exclaimed Mlle. Doncoeur. She blushed, then added, "Except you, Monsieur l'Inspector."

"As I understand it, then, someone got into your apartment last night disguised as Father Christmas."

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"According to the little girl."

"Didn't you hear anything? Is your room far from the little girl's?"

"There's the dining room between us."

"Don't you leave the connecting doors open at night?"

"It isn't necessary. Colette is not afraid, and as a rule she never wakes up. If she wants anything, she has a little bell on her night table."

"Did you go out last night?"

"I did not, Monsieur l'Inspector." Madame Martin was annoyed.

"Did you receive visitors?"

"I do not receive visitors while my husband is away."

Maigret glanced at Mlle. Doncoeur, whose expression did not change. So Madame Martin was telling the truth.

"Did you go to bed late?"

"I read until midnight. As soon as the radio played *Minuit, Chrétiens*, I went to bed."

"And you heard nothing unusual?"

"Nothing."

"Have you asked the concierge if she clicked the latch to let in any strangers last night?"

"I asked her," Mlle. Doncoeur volunteered. "She says she didn't."

"And you found nothing missing from your apartment this morning, Madame Martin? Nothing disturbed in the dining room?"

"No."

"Who is with the little girl now?"

"No one. She's used to staying alone. I can't be at home all day. I have marketing to do, errands to run . . ."

"I understand. You told me Colette is an orphan?"

"Her mother is dead."

"So her father is living. Where is he?"

"Her father's name is Paul Martin. He's my husband's brother. As to telling you where he is—" Madame Martin sketched a vague gesture.

"When did you see him last?"

"About a month ago. A little longer. It was around All Saints' Day. He was finishing a novena."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I may as well tell you everything at once," said Madame Martin with a faint smile, "since we seem to be washing our family linen." She glanced reproachfully at Mlle. Doncoeur. "My brother-in-law, especially since he lost his wife, is not quite respectable."

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"What do you mean exactly?"

"He drinks. He always drank a little, but he never used to get into trouble. He had a good job with a furniture store in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. But since the accident—"

"The accident to his daughter?"

"No, to his wife. He borrowed a car from a friend one Sunday about three years ago and took his wife and little girl to the country. They had lunch at a roadside inn near Mantes-la-Jolie and he drank too much white wine. He sang most of the way back to Paris—until he ran into something near the Bougival bridge. His wife was killed instantly. He cracked his own skull and it's a miracle he's still alive. Colette escaped without a scratch. Paul hasn't been a man since then. We've practically adopted the little girl. He comes to see her occasionally when he's sober. Then he starts over again."

"Do you know where he lives?"

Another vague gesture. "Everywhere. We've seen him loitering around the Bastille like a beggar. Sometimes he sells papers in the street..I can speak freely in front of Mlle. Doncoeur because unfortunately the whole house knows about him."

"Don't you think he might have dressed up as Father Christmas to call on his daughter?"

"That's what I told Mlle. Doncoeur, but she insisted on coming to see you anyhow."

"Because I see no reason for him to take up the flooring," said Mlle. Doncoeur acidly.

"Or perhaps your husband returned to Paris unexpectedly."

"It's certainly something of the sort. I'm not at all disturbed. But Mlle. Doncoeur—"

Decidedly Madame Martin had not crossed the boulevard lightheartedly.

"Do you know where your husband might be staying in Bergerac?"

"Yes. At the Hotel de Bordeaux."

"You hadn't thought of telephoning him?"

"We have no phone. There's only one in the house—the people on the second floor, and they hate to be disturbed."

"Would you object to my calling the Hotel de Bordeaux?"

Madame Martin started to nod, then hesitated. "He'll think something terrible has happened."

"You can speak to him yourself."

"He's not used to my phoning him on the road."

"You'd rather he not know what's happening?"

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"That's not so. I'll talk to him if you like."

Maigret picked up the phone and placed the call. Ten minutes later he was connected with the Hotel de Bordeaux in Bergerac. He passed the instrument to Madame Martin.

"Hello . . . Monsieur Martin, please . . . Yes, Monsieur Jean Martin . . . No matter. Wake him up."

She put her hand over the mouthpiece. "He's still asleep. They've gone to call him."

Then she retreated into silence, evidently rehearsing the words she was to speak to her husband.

"Hello? . . . Hello, darling . . . What? . . . Yes, Merry Christmas! . . . Yes, everything's all right . . . Colette is fine . . . No, that's not why I phoned . . . No, no, no! Nothing's wrong. Please don't worry!" She repeated each word separately. "Please . . . don't . . . worry! I just want to tell you about a strange thing that happened last night. Somebody dressed up like Father Christmas and came into Colette's room . . . No, no! He didn't hurt her. He gave her a big doll . . . Yes, *doll!* . . . And he did queer things to the floor. He removed two boards which he put back in a hurry . . . Mlle. Doncoeur thought I should report it to the police inspector who lives across the street. I'm there now . . . You don't understand? Neither do I . . . You want me to put him on?" She passed the instrument to Maigret. "He wants to speak to you."

A warm masculine voice came over the wire, the voice of an anxious, puzzled man.

"Are you sure my wife and the little girl are all right? . . . It's all so incredible! If it were just the doll, I might suspect my brother. Loraine will tell you about him. Loraine is my wife. Ask her . . . But he wouldn't have removed the flooring . . . Do you think I'd better come home? I can get a train for Paris at three this afternoon . . . What? . . . Thank you so much. It's good to know you'll look out for them."

Loraine Martin took back the phone.

"See, darling? The inspector says there's no danger. It would be foolish to break your trip now. It might spoil your chances of being transferred permanently to Paris."

Mlle. Doncoeur was watching her closely and there was little tenderness in the spinster's eyes.

"I promise to wire you or phone you if there's anything new . . . She's playing quietly with her new doll . . . No, I haven't

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had time yet to give her your present. I'll go right home and do it now."

Madame Martin hung up and declared: "You see." Then, after a pause, "Forgive me for bothering you. It's really not my fault. I'm sure this is all the work of some practical joker—unless it's my brother-in-law. When he's been drinking there's no telling what he might do."

"Do you expect to see him today? Don't you think he might want to see his daughter?"

"That depends. If he's been drinking, no. He's very careful never to come around in that condition."

"May I have your permission to come over and talk with Colette a little later?"

"I see no reason why you shouldn't—if you think it worthwhile."

"Thank you, Monsieur Maigret!" exclaimed Mlle. Doncoeur. Her expression was half grateful, half conspiratorial. "She's such an interesting child! You'll see!"

She backed toward the door.

A few minutes later Maigret watched the two women cross the boulevard. Mlle. Doncoeur, close on the heels of Madame Martin, turned to look up at the windows of the Maigret apartment.

Mme. Maigret opened the kitchen door, flooding the dining room with the aroma of browning onions. She asked gently:

"Are you happy?"

He pretended not to understand. Luckily he had been too busy to think much about the middle-aged couple who had nobody to make a fuss over this Christmas morning.

It was time for him to shave and call on Colette.

He was just about to lather his face when he decided to make a phone call. He didn't bother with his dressing gown. Clad only in pajamas, he dropped into the easy chair by the window—*his* chair—and watched the smoke curling up from all the chimney pots while his call went through.

The ringing at the other end—in headquarters at the Quai des Orfèvres—had a different sound from all other rings. It evoked for him the long empty corridors, the vacant offices, the operator stuck with holiday duty at the switchboard. Then he heard the operator call Lucas with the words: "The boss wants you."

He felt a little like one of his wife's friends who could imagine no greater joy—which she experienced daily—than lying in bed all

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morning, with her windows closed and curtains drawn, and telephoning all her friends, one after the other. By the soft glow of her night-light she managed to maintain a constant state of just having awakened. "What? Ten o'clock already? How's the weather? Is it raining? Have you been out yet? Have you done all your marketing?" And as she established telephonic connection with the hurly-burly of the workaday world, she would sink more and more voluptuously into the warm softness of her bed.

"That you, Chief?"

Maigret, too, felt a need for contact with the working world. He wanted to ask Lucas who was on duty with him, what they were doing, how the shop looked on this Christmas morning.

"Nothing new? Not too busy?"

"Nothing to speak of. Routine."

"I'd like you to get me some information. You can probably do this by phone. First of all, I want a list of all convicts released from prison the last two or three months."

"Which prison?"

"All prisons. But don't bother with any who haven't served at least five years. Then check and see if any of them has ever lived on Boulevard Richard-Lenoir. Got that?"

"I'm making notes."

Lucas was probably somewhat bewildered but he would never admit it.

"Another thing. I want you to locate a man named Paul Martin, a drunk, no fixed address, who frequently hangs out around the Place de la Bastille. I don't want him arrested. I don't want him molested. I just want to know where he spent Christmas Eve. The commissaries should help you on this one."

No use trying. Maigret simply could not reproduce the idle mood of his wife's friend. On the contrary, it embarrassed him to be lolling at home in his pajamas, unshaven, phoning from his favorite easy chair, looking out at a scene of complete peace and quiet in which there was no movement except the smoke curling up from the chimney pots, while at the other end of the wire good old Lucas had been on duty since six in the morning and was probably already unwrapping his sandwiches.

"That's not quite all, old man. I want you to call Bergerac long distance. There's a traveling salesman by the name of Jean Martin staying at the Hotel de Bordeaux there. No, Jean. It's his brother. I want to know if Jean Martin got a telegram or a phone call from

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Paris last night or any time yesterday. And while you're about it, find out where he spent Christmas Eve. I think that's all."

"Shall I call you back?"

"Not right away. I've got to go out for a while. I'll call you when I get home."

"Something happen in your neighborhood?"

"I don't know yet. Maybe."

Mme. Maigret came into the bathroom to talk to him while he finished dressing. He did not put on his overcoat. The smoke curling slowly upward from so many chimney pots blended with the grey of the sky and conjured up the image of just as many overheated apartments, cramped rooms in which he would not be invited to make himself at home. He refused to be uncomfortable. He would put on his hat to cross the boulevard, and that was all.

The building across the way was very much like the one he lived in—old but clean, a little dreary, particularly on a drab December morning. He avoided stopping at the concierge's lodge, but noted she watched him with some annoyance. Doors opened silently as he climbed the stairs. He heard whispering, the padding of slippered feet.

Mlle. Doncoeur, who had doubtless been watching for him, was waiting on the fourth floor landing. She was both shy and excited, as if keeping a secret tryst with a lover.

"This way, Monsieur Maigret. She went out a little while ago."

He frowned, and she noted the fact.

"I told her that you were coming and that she had better wait for you, but she said she had not done her marketing yesterday and that there was nothing in the house. She said all the stores would be closed if she waited too long. Come in."

She had opened the door into Madame Martin's dining room, a small, rather dark room which was clean and tidy.

"I'm looking after the little girl until she comes back. I told Colette that you were coming to see her, and she is delighted. I've spoken to her about you. She's only afraid you might take back her doll."

"When did Madame Martin decide to go out?"

"As soon as we came back across the street, she started dressing."

"Did she dress completely?"

"I don't understand."

"I mean, I suppose she dresses differently when she goes downtown than when she merely goes shopping in the neighborhood."

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"She was quite dressed up. She put on her hat and gloves. And she carried her shopping bag."

Before going to see Colette, Maigret stepped into the kitchen and glanced at the breakfast dishes.

"Did she eat before you came to see me?"

"No. I didn't give her a chance."

"And when she came back?"

"She just made herself a cup of black coffee. I fixed breakfast for Colette while Madame Martin got dressed."

There was a larder on the ledge of the window looking out on the courtyard. Maigret carefully examined its contents: butter, eggs, vegetables, some cold meat. He found two uncut loaves of fresh bread in the kitchen cupboard. Colette had eaten croissants with her hot chocolate.

"How well do you know Madame Martin?"

"We're neighbors, aren't we? And I've seen more of her since Colette has been in bed. She often asks me to keep an eye on the little girl when she goes out."

"Does she go out much?"

"Not very often. Just for her marketing."

Maigret tried to analyze the curious impression he had had on entering the apartment. There was something in the atmosphere that disturbed him, something about the arrangement of the furniture, the special kind of neatness that prevailed, even the smell of the place. As he followed Mlle. Doncoeur into the dining room, he thought he knew what it was.

Madame Martin had told him that her husband had lived in this apartment before their marriage. And even though Madame Martin had lived there for five years, it had remained a bachelor's apartment. He pointed to the two enlarged photographs standing on opposite ends of the mantelpiece.

"Who are they?"

"Monsieur Martin's father and mother."

"Doesn't Madame Martin have photos of her own parents about?"

"I've never heard her speak of them. I suppose she's an orphan."

Even the bedroom was without the feminine touch. He opened a closet. Next to the neat rows of masculine clothing, the woman's clothes were hanging, mostly severely tailored suits and conservative dresses. He did not open the bureau drawers but he was sure they did not contain the usual trinkets and knickknacks that women collect.

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"Mademoiselle Doncoeur!" called a calm little voice.

"Let's talk to Colette," said Maigret.

The child's room was as austere and cold as the others. The little girl lay in a bed too large for her, her face solemn, her eyes questioning but trusting.

"Are you the inspector, Monsieur?"

"I'm the inspector, my girl. Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid. Hasn't Mama Loraine come home yet?"

Maigret pursed his lips. The Martins had practically adopted their niece, yet the child said "Mama Loraine," not just "Mama."

"Do you believe it was Father Christmas who came to see me last night?" Colette asked Maigret.

"I'm sure it was."

"Mama Loraine doesn't believe it. She never believes me."

The girl had a dainty, attractive little face, with very bright eyes that stared at Maigret with level persistence. The plaster cast which sheathed one leg all the way to the hip made a thick bulge under the blankets.

Mlle. Doncoeur hovered in the doorway, evidently anxious to leave the inspector alone with the girl. She said: "I must run home for a moment to make sure my lunch isn't burning."

Maigret sat down beside the bed, wondering how to go about questioning the girl.

"Do you love Mama Loraine very much?" he began.

"Yes, Monsieur." She replied without hesitation and without enthusiasm.

"And your papa?"

"Which one? Because I have two papas, you know—Papa Paul and Papa Jean."

"Has it been a long time since you saw Papa Paul?"

"I don't remember. Perhaps several weeks. He promised to bring me a toy for Christmas, but he hasn't come yet. He must be sick."

"Is he often sick?"

"Yes, often. When he's sick he doesn't come to see me."

"And your Papa Jean?"

"He's away on a trip, but he'll be back for New Year's. Maybe then he'll be appointed to the Paris office and won't have to go away anymore. That would make him very happy and me, too."

"Do many of your friends come to see you since you've been in bed?"

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"What friends? The girls in school don't know where I live. Or maybe they know but their parents don't let them come alone."

"What about Mama Loraine's friends? Or your papa's?"

"Nobody comes, ever."

"Ever? Are you sure?"

"Only the man to read the gas meter, or for the electricity. I can hear them, because the door is almost always open. I recognize their voices. Once a man came and I didn't recognize his voice. Or twice."

"How long ago was that?"

"The first time was the day after my accident. I remember because the doctor just left."

"Who was it?"

"I didn't see him. He knocked at the other door. I heard him talking and then Mama Loraine came and closed my door. They talked for quite a while but I couldn't hear very well. Afterward Mama Loraine said it was a man who wanted to sell her some insurance. I don't know what that is."

"And he came back?"

"Five or six days ago. It was night and I'd already turned off my light. I wasn't asleep, though. I heard someone knock, and then they talked in low voices like the first time. Mademoiselle Doncoeur sometimes comes over in the evening, but I could tell it wasn't she. I thought they were quarreling and I was frightened. I called out, and Mama Loraine came in and said it was the man about the insurance again and I should go to sleep."

"Did he stay long?"

"I don't know. I think I fell asleep."

"And you didn't see him either time?"

"No, but I'd recognize his voice."

"Even though he speaks in low tones?"

"Yes, that's why. When he speaks low it sounds just like a big bumblebee. I can keep the doll, can't I? Mama Loraine bought me two boxes of candy and a little sewing kit. She bought me a doll, too, but it wasn't nearly as big as the doll Father Christmas gave me, because she's not rich. She showed it to me this morning before she left, and then she put it back in the box. I have the big one now, so I won't need the little one and Mama Loraine can take it back to the store."

The apartment was overheated, yet Maigret felt suddenly cold. The building was very much like the one across the street, yet not

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only did the rooms seem smaller and stuffier, but the whole world seemed smaller and meaner over here.

He bent over the floor near the fireplace. He lifted the loose floorboards, but saw nothing but an empty, dusty cavity smelling of dampness. There were scratches on the planks which indicated they had been forced up with a chisel or some similar instrument.

He examined the outside door and found indications that it had been forced. It was obviously an amateur's work, and luckily for him, the job had been an easy one.

"Father Christmas wasn't angry when he saw you watching him?"

"No, Monsieur. He was busy making a hole in the floor so he could go and see the little boy downstairs."

"Did he speak to you?"

"I think he smiled at me. I'm not sure, though, because of his whiskers. It wasn't very light. But I'm sure he put his finger to his lips so I wouldn't call anybody, because grown-ups aren't supposed to see Father Christmas. Did you ever see him?"

"A very long time ago."

"When you were little?"

Maigret heard footsteps in the hallway. The door opened and Madame Martin came in. She was wearing a grey tailored suit and a small beige hat and carried a brown shopping bag. She was visibly cold, for her skin was taut and very white, yet she must have hurried up the stairs, since there were two pink spots on her cheeks and she was out of breath. Unsmiling, she asked Maigret:

"Has she been a good girl?" Then, as she took off her jacket, "I apologize for making you wait. I had so many things to buy, and I was afraid the stores would all be closed later on."

"Did you meet anyone?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. I was wondering if anyone tried to speak to you."

She had had plenty of time to go much further than the Rue Amelot or the Rue du Chemin-Vert where most of the neighborhood shops were located. She had even had time to go across Paris and back by taxi or the Metro.

Mlle. Doncoeur returned to ask if there was anything she could do. Madame Martin was about to say no when Maigret intervened: "I'd like you to stay with Colette while I step into the next room."

Mlle. Doncoeur understood that he wanted her to keep the child busy while he questioned the foster-mother. Madame Martin must have understood, too, but she gave no indication.

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"Please come in. Do you mind if I take off my things?"

Madame Martin put her package in the kitchen. She took off her hat and fluffed out her pale blonde hair. When she had closed the bedroom door, she said: "Mlle. Doncoeur is all excited. This is quite an event, isn't it, for an old maid—particularly an old maid who cuts out every newspaper article about a certain police inspector, and who finally has the inspector in her own house—Do you mind?"

She had taken a cigarette from a silver case, tapped the end, and snapped a lighter. The gesture somehow prompted Maigret's next question:

"You're not working, Madame Martin?"

"It would be difficult to hold a job and take care of the house and the little girl, too, even when the child is in school. Besides, my husband won't allow me to work."

"But you did work before you met him?"

"Naturally. I had to earn a living. Won't you sit down?"

He lowered himself into a rude raffia-bottomed chair. She rested one thigh against the edge of a table.

"You were a typist?"

"I have been a typist."

"For long?"

"Quite a while."

"You were still a typist when you met Martin? You must forgive me for asking these personal questions."

"It's your job."

"You were married five years ago. Were you working then? Just a moment. May I ask your age?"

"I'm thirty-three. I was twenty-eight then, and I was working for a Monsieur Lorilleux in the Palais-Royal arcades."

"As his secretary?"

"Monsieur Lorilleux had a jewelry shop. Or more exactly, he sold souvenirs and old coins. You know those old shops in the Palais-Royal. I was salesgirl, bookkeeper, *and* secretary. I took care of the shop when he was away."

"He was married?"

"And father of three children."

"You left him to marry Martin?"

"Not exactly. Jean didn't want me to go on working, but he wasn't making very much money then and I had quite a good job. So I kept it for the first few months."

"And then?"

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"Then a strange thing happened. One morning I came to work at nine o'clock as usual, and I found the door locked. I thought Monsieur Lorilleux had overslept, so I waited."

"Where did he live?"

"Rue Mazarine with his family. At half-past nine I began to worry."

"Was he dead?"

"No. I phoned his wife, who said he had left the house at eight o'clock as usual."

"Where did you telephone from?"

"From the glove shop next door. I waited all morning. His wife came down and we went to the commissariat together to report him missing, but the police didn't take it very seriously. They just asked his wife if he'd ever had heart trouble, if he had a mistress—things like that. But he was never seen again, and nobody ever heard from him. Then some Polish people bought out the store and my husband made me stop working."

"How long was this after your marriage?"

"Four months."

"Your husband was already traveling in the southwest?"

"He had the same territory he has now."

"Was he in Paris when your employer disappeared?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Didn't the police examine the premises?"

"Nothing had been touched since the night before. Nothing was missing."

"Do you know what became of Madame Lorilleux?"

"She lived for a while on the money from the sale of the store. Then she bought a little dry-goods shop not far from here, in the Rue du Pas-de-la-Mule. Her children must be grown up now, probably married."

"Do you still see her?"

"I go into her shop once in a while. That's how I know she's in business in the neighborhood. The first time I saw her there I didn't recognize her."

"How long ago was that?"

"I don't know. Six months or so."

"Does she have a telephone?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"What kind of man was Lorilleux?"

"You mean physically?"

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"Let's start with the physical."

"He was a big man, taller than you, and broader. He was fat, but flabby, if you know what I mean. And rather sloppy looking."

"How old?"

"Around fifty. I can't say exactly. He had a little salt-and-pepper mustache, and his clothes were always too big for him."

"You were familiar with his habits?"

"He walked to work every morning. He got down fifteen minutes ahead of me and cleared up the mail before I arrived. He didn't talk much. He was a rather gloomy person. He spent most of the day in the little office behind the shop."

"No romantic adventures?"

"Not that I know of."

"Didn't he try to make love to you?"

"No!" The monosyllable was tartly emphatic.

"But he thought highly of you?"

"I think I was a great help to him."

"Did your husband ever meet him?"

"They never spoke. Jean sometimes came to wait for me outside the shop, but he never came in." A note of impatience, tinged with anger, crept into her voice. "Is that all you want to know?"

"May I point out, Madame Martin, that you are the one who came to get me?"

"Only because a crazy old maid practically dragged me there so she could get a close-up look at you."

"You don't like Mlle. Doncoeur?"

"I don't like people who can't mind their own business."

"People like Mlle. Doncoeur?"

"You know that we've taken in my brother-in-law's child. Believe me or not, I've done everything I can for her. I treat her the way I'd treat my own child." She paused to light a fresh cigarette, and Maigret tried unsuccessfully to picture her as a doting mother. "And now that old maid is always over here, offering to help me with the child. Every time I start to go out, I find her in the hallway, smiling sweetly, and saying, 'You mustn't leave Colette all alone, Madame Martin. Let me go in and keep her company.' I sometimes wonder if she doesn't go through my drawers when I'm out."

"You put up with her, nevertheless."

"How can I help it? Colette asks for her, especially since she's been in bed. And my husband is fond of her because when he was a bachelor, she took care of him when he was sick with pleurisy."

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"Have you already returned the doll you bought for Colette's Christmas?"

She frowned and glanced at the door to the child's bedroom. "I see you've been questioning the little girl. No, I haven't taken it back for the very good reason that all the big department stores are closed today. Would you like to see it?"

She spoke defiantly, expecting him to refuse, but he said nothing. He examined the cardboard box, noting the price tag. It was a very cheap doll.

"May I ask where you went this morning?"

"I did my marketing."

"Rue Amelot or Rue du Chemin-Vert?"

"Both."

"If I may be indiscreet, what did you buy?"

Furious, she stormed into the kitchen, snatched up her shopping bag, and dumped it on the dining room table. "Look for yourself!"

There were three tins of sardines, butter, potatoes, some ham, and a head of lettuce.

She fixed him with a hard, unwavering stare. She was not in the least nervous. Spiteful, rather.

"Any more questions?"

"Yes, the name of your insurance agent."

"My insurance . . ." She was obviously puzzled.

"Insurance agent. The one who came to see you."

"I'm sorry. I was at a loss for a moment because you spoke of *my* agent as though he were really handling a policy for me. So Colette told you that, too? Actually, a man did come to see me twice, trying to sell me a policy. He was one of those door-to-door salesmen, and I thought at first he was selling vacuum cleaners, not life insurance. I had a terrible time getting rid of him."

"Did he stay long?"

"Long enough for me to convince him that I had no desire to take out a policy."

"What company did he represent?"

"He told me but I've forgotten. Something with 'Mutual' in it."

"And he came back later?"

"Yes."

"What time does Colette usually go to sleep?"

"I put out her light at 7:30, but sometimes she talks to herself in the dark until much later."

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"So the second time the insurance man called, it was later than 7:30?"

"Possibly." She saw the trap. "I remember now I was washing the dishes."

"And you let him in?"

"He had his foot in the door."

"Did he call on other tenants in the building?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, but I'm sure you will inquire. Must you cross-examine me like a criminal, just because a little girl imagines she saw Santa Claus? If my husband were here—"

"By the way, does your husband carry life insurance?"

"I think so. In fact, I'm sure he does."

Maigret picked up his hat from a chair and started for the door. Madame Martin seemed surprised.

"Is that all?"

"That's all. It seems your brother-in-law promised to come and see his daughter today. If he should come, I would be grateful if you let me know. And now I'd like a few words with Mlle. Doncoeur."

There was a convent smell about Mlle. Doncoeur's apartment, but there was no dog or cat in sight, no antimacassars on the chairs, no bric-a-brac on the mantelpiece.

"Have you lived in this house long, Mlle. Doncoeur?"

"Twenty-five years, Monsieur l'Inspecteur. I'm one of the oldest tenants. I remember when I first moved in you were already living across the street, and you wore long mustaches."

"Who lived in the next apartment before Martin moved in?"

"A public works engineer. I don't remember his name, but I could look it up for you. He had a wife and daughter. The girl was a deaf-mute. It was very sad. They went to live somewhere in the country."

"Have you been bothered by a door-to-door insurance agent recently?"

"Not recently. There was one who came around two or three years ago."

"You don't like Madame Martin, do you?"

"Why?"

"I asked if you liked Madame Martin?"

"Well, if I had a son—"

"Go on."

"If I had a son, I don't think I would like Madame Martin for a daughter-in-law. Especially as Monsieur Martin is such a nice man, so kind."

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"You think he is unhappy with his wife?"

"I wouldn't say that. I have nothing against her, really. She can't help being the kind of woman she is."

"What kind of woman is she?"

"I couldn't say, exactly. You've seen her. You're a better judge of those things than I am. In a way, she's not like a woman at all. I'll wager she never shed a tear in her life. True, she is bringing up the child properly, decently, but she never says a kind word to her. She acts exasperated when I tell Colette a fairy tale. I'm sure she's told the girl there is no Santa Claus. Luckily Colette doesn't believe her."

"The child doesn't like her either, does she?"

"Colette is always obedient. She tries to do what's expected of her. I think she's just as happy to be left alone."

"Is she alone much?"

"Not much. I'm not reproaching Madame Martin. It's hard to explain. She wants to live her own life. She's not interested in others. She doesn't even talk much about herself."

"Have you ever met her brother-in-law—Colette's father?"

"I've seen him on the landing, but I've never spoken to him. He walks with his head down, as if he were ashamed of something. He always looks as if he slept in his clothes. No, I don't think it was he last night, Monsieur Maigret. He's not the type. Unless he was terribly drunk."

On his way out Maigret looked in at the concierge's lodge, a dark cubicle where the light burned all day.

It was noon when he started back across the boulevard. Curtains stirred at the windows of the house behind him. Curtains stirred at his own window, too. Mme. Maigret was watching for him so she would know when to put the chicken in the oven. He waved to her. He wanted very much to stick out his tongue and lick up a few of the tiny snowflakes that were drifting down. He could still remember their taste.

"I wonder if that little tike is happy over there," sighed Mme. Maigret as she got up from the table to bring the coffee from the kitchen.

She could see he wasn't listening. He had pushed back his chair and was stuffing his pipe while staring at the purring stove. For her own satisfaction she added: "I don't see how she could be happy with that woman."

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He smiled vaguely, as he always did when he hadn't heard what she said, and continued to stare at the tiny flames licking evenly at the mica windows of her salamander. There were at least ten similar stoves in the house, all purring alike in ten similar dining rooms with wine and cakes on the table, a carafe of cordial waiting on the sideboard, and all the windows pale with the same hard, grey light of a sunless day.

It was perhaps this very familiarity which had been confusing his subconscious since morning. Nine times out of ten his investigations plunged him abruptly into new surroundings, set him at grips with people of a world he barely knew, people of a social level whose habits and manners he had to study from scratch. But in this case, which was not really a case since he had no official assignment, the whole approach was unfamiliar because the background was too familiar. For the first time in his career something professional was happening in his own world, in a building which might just as well be his building.

The Martins could easily have been living on his floor, instead of across the street, and it would probably have been Mme. Maigret who would look after Colette when her aunt was away. There was an elderly maiden lady living just under him who was a plumper, paler replica of Mlle. Doncoeur. The frames of the photographs of Martin's father and mother were exactly the same as those which framed Maigret's father and mother, and the enlargements had probably been made by the same studio.

Was that what was bothering him? He seemed to lack perspective. He was unable to look at people and things from a fresh, new viewpoint.

He had detailed his morning activities during dinner—a pleasant little Christmas dinner which had left him with an overstuffed feeling—and his wife had listened while looking at the windows across the street with an air of embarrassment.

"Is the concierge sure that nobody could have come in from outside?"

"She's not so sure any more. She was entertaining friends until after midnight. And after she had gone to bed, there were considerable comings and goings, which is natural for Christmas Eve."

"Do you think something more is going to happen?"

That was a question that had been plaguing Maigret all morning. First of all, he had to consider that Madame Martin had not come to see him spontaneously, but only on the insistence of Mlle. Don-

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coeur. If she had got up earlier, if she had been the first to see the doll and hear the story of Father Christmas, wouldn't she have kept the secret and ordered the little girl to say nothing?

And later she had taken the first opportunity to go out, even though there was plenty to eat in the house for the day. And she had been so absent-minded that she had bought butter, although there was still a pound in the cooler.

Maigret got up from the table and resettled himself in his chair by the window. He picked up the phone and called Quai des Orfèvres.

"Lucas?"

"I got what you wanted, Chief. I have a list of all prisoners released for the last four months. There aren't as many as I thought. And none of them has lived in the Boulevard Richard-Lenoir at any time."

That didn't matter any more now. At first Maigret had thought that a tenant across the street might have hidden money or stolen goods under the floor before he was arrested. His first thought on getting out of jail would be to recover his booty. With the little girl bedridden, however, the room was occupied day and night. Impersonating Father Christmas would not have been a bad idea to get into the room. Had this been the case, however, Madame Martin would not have been so reluctant to call in Maigret. Nor would she have been in so great a hurry to get out of the house afterwards on such a flimsy pretext. So Maigret had abandoned that theory.

"You want me to check each prisoner further?"

"Never mind. Any news about Paul Martin?"

"That was easy. He's known in every station house between the Bastille and the Hotel de Ville, and even on the Boulevard Saint-Michel."

"What did he do last night?"

"First he went aboard the Salvation Army barge to eat. He's a regular there one day a week and yesterday was his day. They had a special feast for Christmas Eve and he had to stand in line quite a while."

"After that?"

"About eleven o'clock he went to the Latin Quarter and opened doors for motorists in front of a night club. He must have collected enough money in tips to get himself a sinkful, because he was picked up dead drunk near the Place Maubert at four in the morning. He was taken to the station house to sleep it off, and was there until eleven this morning. They'd just turned him loose when I phoned,

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and they promised to bring him to me when they find him again. He still had a few francs in his pocket."

"What about Bergerac?"

"Jean Martin is taking the afternoon train for Paris. He was quite upset by a phone call he got this morning."

"He got only one call?"

"Only one this morning. He got a call last night while he was eating dinner."

"You know who called him?"

"The desk clerk says it was a man's voice, asking for Monsieur Jean Martin. He sent somebody into the dining room for Martin but when Martin got to the phone, the caller had hung up. Seems it spoiled his whole evening. He went out with a bunch of traveling salesmen to some local hot-spot where there were pretty girls and whatnot, but after drinking a few glasses of champagne, he couldn't talk about anything except his wife and daughter. The niece he calls his daughter, it seems. He had such a dismal evening that he went home early. Three A.M. That's all you wanted to know, Chief?"

When Maigret didn't reply, Lucas had to satisfy his curiosity. "You still phoning from home, Chief? What's happening up your way? Somebody get killed?"

"I still can't say. Right now all I know is that the principals are a seven-year-old girl, a doll, and Father Christmas."

"Ah?"

"One more thing. Try to get me the home address of the manager of Zenith Watches, Avenue de l'Opéra. You ought to be able to raise somebody there, even on Christmas Day. Call me back."

"Soon as I have something."

Mme. Maigret had just served him a glass of Alsatian plum brandy which his sister had sent them. He smacked his lips. For a moment he was tempted to forget all about the business of the doll and Father Christmas. It would be much simpler just to take his wife to the movies.

"What color eyes has she?"

It took him a moment to realize that the only person in the case who interested Mme. Maigret was the little girl.

"Why, I'm not quite sure. They can't be dark. She has blonde hair."

"So they're blue."

"Maybe they're blue. Very light, in any case. And they are very serious."

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"Because she doesn't look at things like a child. Does she laugh?"

"She hasn't much to laugh about."

"A child can always laugh if she feels herself surrounded by people she can trust, people who let her act her age. I don't like that woman."

"You prefer Mlle. Doncoeur?"

"She may be an old maid but I'm sure she knows more about children than that Madame Martin. I've seen *her* in the shops. Madame Martin is one of those women who watch the scales and take their money out of their pocketbooks, coin by coin. She always looks around suspiciously, as though everybody was out to cheat her."

The telephone rang as Mme. Maigret was repeating, "I don't like that woman."

It was Lucas calling, with the address of Monsieur Arthur Godefroy, general manager in France for Zenith Watches. He lived in a sumptuous villa at Saint-Cloud, and Lucas had discovered that he was at home. He added:

"Paul Martin is here, Chief. When they brought him in, he started crying. He thought something had happened to his daughter. But he's all right now—except for an awful hangover. What do I do with him?"

"Anyone around who can come up here with him?"

"Torrence just came on duty. I think he could use a little fresh air. He looks as if he had a hard night, too. Anything more from me, Chief?"

"Yes. Call Palais-Royal station. About five years ago a man named Lorilleux disappeared without a trace. He sold jewelry and old coins in the Palais-Royal arcades. Get me all the details you can on his disappearance."

Maigret smiled as he noted that his wife was sitting opposite him with her knitting. He had never before worked on a case in such domestic surroundings.

"Do I call you back?" asked Lucas.

"I don't expect to move an inch from my chair."

A moment later Maigret was talking to Monsieur Godefroy, who had a decided Swiss accent. The Zenith manager thought that something must have happened to Jean Martin for anyone to be making inquiries about him on Christmas Day.

"Most able. Most devoted. I'm bringing him into Paris to be assistant manager next year—next week, that is. Why do you ask? Has anything—? Be still, you!" He paused to quiet the juvenile hubbub

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in the background. "You must excuse me. All my family is with me today and—"

"Tell me, Monsieur Godefroy, has anyone called your office these last few days to inquire about Monsieur Martin's current address?"

"Yesterday morning, as a matter of fact. I was very busy with the holiday rush, but he asked to speak to me personally. I forget what name he gave. He said he had an extremely important message for Jean Martin, so I told him how to get in touch with Martin in Bergerac."

"He asked you nothing else?"

"No. He hung up at once. Is anything wrong?"

"I hope not. Thank you very much, Monsieur."

The screams of children began again in the background and Maigret said goodbye.

"Were you listening?"

"I heard what you said. I didn't hear his answers."

"A man called the office yesterday morning to get Martin's address. The same man undoubtedly called Bergerac that evening to make sure Martin was still there, and therefore would not be at his Boulevard Richard-Lenoir address for Christmas Eve."

"The same man who appeared last night as Father Christmas?"

"More than likely. That seems to clear Paul Martin. He would not have to make two phone calls to find out where his brother was. Madame Martin would have told him."

"You're really getting excited about this case. You're delighted that it came up, aren't you? Confess!" And while Maigret was racking his brain for excuses, she added: "It's quite natural. I'm fascinated, too. How much longer do you think the child will have to keep her leg in a cast?"

"I didn't ask."

"I wonder what sort of complications she could have had?"

Maigret looked at her curiously. Unconsciously she had switched his mind onto a new track.

"That's not such a stupid remark you just made."

"What did I say?"

"After all, since she's been in bed for two months, she should be up and around soon, barring really serious complications."

"She'll probably have to walk on crutches at first."

"That's not the point. In a few days then, or a few weeks at most, she will no longer be confined to her room. She'll go for a walk with Madame Martin. And the coast will be clear for anyone to enter the

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apartment without dressing up like Father Christmas."

Mme. Maigret's lips were moving. While listening to her husband and watching his face, she was counting stitches.

"First of all, the presence of the child forced our man to use trickery. She's been in bed for two months—two months for him to wait. Without the complications the flooring could have been taken up several weeks ago. Our man must have had urgent reasons for acting at once, without further delay."

"Monsieur Martin will return to Paris in a few days?"

"Exactly."

"What do you suppose the man found underneath the floor?"

"Did he really find anything? If not, his problem is still as pressing as it was last night. So he will take further action."

"What action?"

"I don't know."

"Look, Maigret, isn't the child in danger? Do you think she's safe with that woman?"

"I could answer that if I knew where Madame Martin went this morning on the pretext of doing her shopping." He picked up the phone again and called Police Judiciaire.

"I'm pestering you again, Lucas. I want you to locate a taxi that picked up a passenger this morning between nine and ten somewhere near Boulevard Richard-Lenoir. The fare was a woman in her early thirties, blonde, slim but solidly built. She was wearing a grey suit and a beige hat. She carried a brown shopping bag. I want to know her destination. There couldn't have been so many cabs on the street at that hour."

"Is Paul Martin with you?"

"Not yet."

"He'll be there soon. About that other thing, the Lorilleux matter, the Palais-Royal boys are checking their files. You'll have the data in a few minutes."

Jean Martin must be catching his train in Bergerac at this moment. Little Colette was probably taking her nap. Mlle. Doncoeur was doubtless sitting behind her window curtain, wondering what Maigret was up to.

People were beginning to come out now, families with their children, the children with their new toys. There were certainly queues in front of the cinemas.

A taxi stopped in front of the house. Footsteps sounded in the stairway. Mme. Maigret went to the door. The deep bass voice of Torrence rumbled: "You there, Chief?"

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Torrence came in with an ageless man who hugged the walls and looked humbly at the floor. Maigret went to the sideboard and filled two glasses with plum brandy.

"To your health," he said.

The man looked at Maigret with surprised, anxious eyes. He raised a trembling, hesitant hand.

"To your health, Monsieur Martin. I'm sorry to make you come all the way up here, but you won't have far to go now to see your daughter."

"Nothing has happened to her?"

"No, no. When I saw her this morning she was playing with her new doll. You can go, Torrence. Lucas must need you."

Mme. Maigret had gone into the bedroom with her knitting. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, counting her stitches.

"Sit down, Monsieur Martin."

The man had touched his lips to the glass and set it down. He looked at it uneasily.

"You have nothing to worry about. Just tell yourself that I know all about you."

"I wanted to visit her this morning," the man sighed. "I swore I would go to bed early so I could wish her a Merry Christmas."

"I know that, too."

"It's always the same. I swear I'll take just one drink, just enough to pick me up."

"You have only one brother, Monsieur Martin?"

"Yes, Jean. He's six years younger than I am. He and my wife and my daughter were all I had to love in this world.

"You don't love your sister-in-law?"

He shivered. He seemed both startled and embarrassed.

"I have nothing against Loraine."

"You entrusted your child to her, didn't you?"

"Well, yes, that is to say, when my wife died and I began to slip."

"I understand. Is your daughter happy?"

"I think so, yes. She never complains."

"Have you ever tried to get back on your feet?"

"Every night I promise myself to turn over a new leaf, but next day I start all over again. I even went to see a doctor. I followed his advice for a few days. But when I went back, he was very busy. He said I ought to be in a special sanatorium."

He reached for his glass, then hesitated. Maigret picked up his own glass and took a swallow to encourage him.

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"Did you ever meet a man in your sister-in-law's apartment?"

"No, I think she's above reproach on that score."

"Do you know where your brother first met her?"

"In a little restaurant in the Rue Beaujolais where he used to eat when he was in Paris. It was near the shop where Loraine was working."

"Did they have a long engagement?"

"I can't say. Jean was on the road for two months and when he came back he told me he was getting married."

"Were you his best man?"

"Yes. Loraine has no family in Paris. She's an orphan. So her landlady acted as her witness. Is there something wrong?"

"I don't know yet. A man entered Colette's room last night dressed as Father Christmas. He gave your girl a doll and lifted two loose boards from the floor."

"Do you think I'm in fit condition to see her?"

"You can go over in a little while. If you feel like it you can shave here. Do you think your brother would be likely to hide anything under the floor?"

"Jean? Never!"

"Even if he wanted to hide something from his wife?"

"He doesn't hide things from his wife. You don't know him. He's one of those rare humans—a scrupulously honest man. When he comes home from the road, she knows exactly how much money he has left, to the last centime."

"Is she jealous?"

Paul Martin did not reply.

"I advise you to tell me what you know. Remember that your daughter is involved in this."

"I don't think that Loraine is especially jealous. Not of women, at least. Perhaps about money. At least that's what my poor wife always said. She didn't like Loraine."

"Why not?"

"She used to say that Loraine's lips were too thin, that she was too polite, too cold, always on the defensive. My wife always thought that Loraine set her cap for Jean because he had a good job with a future and owned his own furniture."

"Loraine had no money of her own?"

"She never speaks of her family. I understand her father died when she was very young and her mother did housework somewhere

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in the Glacière quarter. My poor wife used to say, 'Loraine knows what she wants.' "

"Do you think she was Lorilleux's mistress?"

Paul Martin did not reply. Maigret poured him another finger of plum brandy. Martin gave him a grateful look, but he did not touch the glass. Perhaps he was thinking that his daughter might notice his breath when he crossed the street later on.

"I'll get you a cup of coffee in a moment. Your wife must have had her own ideas on the subject."

"How did you know? Please note that my wife never spoke disparagingly of people. But with Loraine it was almost pathological. Whenever we were to meet my sister-in-law, I used to beg my wife not to show her antipathy. It's funny that you should bring all that up now, at this time in my life. Do you think I did wrong in letting her take Colette? I sometimes think so. But what else could I have done?"

"You didn't answer my question about Loraine's former employer."

"Oh, yes. My wife always said it was very convenient for Loraine to have married a man who was away from home so much."

"You know where she lived before her marriage?"

"In a street just off Boulevard Sébastopol, on the right as you walk from Rue de Rivoli toward the Boulevard. I remember we picked her up there the day of the wedding."

"Rue Pernelle?"

"That's it. The fourth or fifth house on the left side of the street is a quiet rooming house, quite respectable. People who work in the neighborhood live there. I remember there were several little actresses from the Châtelet."

"Would you like to shave, Monsieur Martin?"

"I'm ashamed. Still, since my daughter is just across the street—"

"Come with me."

Maigret took him through the kitchen so he wouldn't have to meet Mme. Maigret in the bedroom. He set out the necessary toilet articles, not forgetting a clothes brush.

When he returned to the dining room, Mme. Maigret poked her head through the door and whispered: "What's he doing?"

"He's shaving."

Once more Maigret reached for the telephone. He was certainly giving poor Lucas a busy Christmas Day.

"Are you indispensable at the office?"

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"Not if Torrence sits in for me. I've got the information you wanted."

"In just a moment. I want you to jump over to Rue Pernelle. There's a rooming house a few doors down from the Boulevard Sébastopol. If the proprietor wasn't there five years ago, try to dig up someone who lived there then. I want everything you can find out on a certain Loraine."

"Loraine who?"

"Just a minute. I didn't think of that."

Through the bathroom door he asked Martin for the maiden name of his sister-in-law. A few seconds later he was on the phone again.

"Loraine Boitel," he told Lucas. "The landlady of this rooming house was witness at her marriage to Jean Martin. Loraine Boitel was working for Lorilleux at the time. Try to find out if she was more than a secretary to him, and if he ever came to see her. And work fast. This may be urgent. What have you got on Lorilleux?"

"He was quite a fellow. At home in the Rue Mazarine he was a good respectable family man. In his Palais-Royal shop he not only sold old coins and souvenirs of Paris, but he had a fine collection of pornographic books and obscene pictures."

"Not unusual for the Palais-Royal."

"I don't know what else went on there. There was a big divan covered with red silk rep in the back room, but the investigation was never pushed. Seems there were a lot of important names among his customers."

"What about Loraine Boitel?"

"The report barely mentions her, except that she waited all morning for Lorilleux the day he disappeared. I was on the phone about this when Langlois of the Financial Squad came into my office. The name Lorilleux rang a bell in the back of his mind and he went to check his files. Nothing definite on him, but he'd been making frequent trips to Switzerland and back, and there was a lot of gold smuggling going on at that time. Lorilleux was stopped and searched at the frontier several times, but they never found anything on him."

"Lucas, old man, hurry over to Rue Pernelle. I'm more than ever convinced that this is urgent."

Paul Martin appeared in the doorway, his pale cheeks close-shaven.

"I don't know how to thank you. I'm very much embarrassed."

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"You'll visit your daughter now, won't you? I don't know how long you usually stay, but today I don't want you to leave until I come for you."

"I can't very well stay all night, can I?"

"Stay all night if necessary. Manage the best you can."

"Is the little girl in danger?"

"I don't know, but your place today is with your daughter."

Paul Martin drank his black coffee avidly, and started for the stairway. The door had just closed after him when Mme. Maigret rushed into the dining room.

"You can't let him go to see his daughter empty-handed on Christmas Day!"

"But—" Maigret was about to say that there just didn't happen to be a doll around the house, when his wife thrust a small shiny object into his hands. It was a gold thimble which had been in her sewing basket for years but which she never used.

"Give him that. Little girls always like thimbles. Hurry!"

He shouted from the landing: "Monsieur Martin! Just a minute, Monsieur Martin!"

He closed the man's fingers over the thimble. "Don't tell a soul where you got this."

Before re-entering the dining room he stood for a moment on the threshold, grumbling. Then he sighed: "I hope you've finished making me play Father Christmas."

"I'll bet she likes the thimble as well as a doll. It's something grown-ups use, you know."

They watched the man cross the boulevard. Before going into the house, he turned to look up at Maigret's windows, as if seeking encouragement.

"Do you think he'll ever be cured?"

"I doubt it."

"If anything happens to that woman, to Madame Martin—"

"Well?"

"Nothing. I was thinking of the little girl. I wonder what would become of her."

Ten minutes passed. Maigret had opened his newspaper and lighted his pipe. His wife had settled down again with her knitting. She was counting stitches when he exhaled a cloud of smoke and murmured: "You haven't even seen her."

Maigret was looking for an old envelope, on the back of which he had jotted down a few notes summing up the day's events. He found

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it in a drawer into which Mme. Maigret always stuffed any papers she found lying around the house.

This was the only investigation, he mused, which he had ever conducted practically in its entirety from his favorite armchair. It was also unusual in that no dramatic stroke of luck had come to his aid. True, luck had been on his side, in that he had been able to muster all his facts by the simplest and most direct means. How many times had he deployed scores of detectives on an all-night search for some minor detail. This might have happened, for instance, if Monsieur Arthur Godefroy of Zenith had gone home to Zurich for Christmas, or if he had been out of reach of a telephone. Or if Monsieur Godefroy had been unaware of the telephone inquiry regarding the whereabouts of Jean Martin.

When Lucas arrived shortly after four o'clock, his nose red and his face pinched with the cold, he too could report the same kind of undramatic luck.

A thick yellow fog, unusual for Paris, had settled over the city. Lights shone in all the windows, floating on the murk like ships at sea or distant beacons. Familiar details had been blotted out so completely that Maigret half-expected to hear the moan of foghorns.

For some reason, perhaps because of some boyhood memory, Maigret was pleased to see the weather thicken. He was also pleased to see Lucas walk into his apartment, take off his overcoat, sit down, and stretch out his frozen hands toward the fire.

In appearance, Lucas was a reduced-scale model of Maigret—a head shorter, half as broad in the shoulders, half as stern in expression although he tried hard. Without conscious imitation but with conscious admiration, Lucas had copied his chief's slightest gestures, postures, and changes of expression—even to the ceremony of inhaling the fragrance of the plum brandy before touching his lips to the glass.

The landlady of the rooming house in the Rue Pernelle had been killed in a subway accident two years earlier, Lucas reported. Luckily, the place had been taken over by the former night watchman, who had been in trouble with the police on morals charges.

"So it was easy enough to make him talk," said Lucas, lighting a pipe much too large for him. "I was surprised that he had the money to buy the house, but he explained that he was front man for a big investor who had money in all sorts of enterprises but didn't like to have his name used."

"What kind of dump is it?"

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"Looks respectable. Clean enough. Office on the mezzanine. Rooms by the month, some by the week, and a few on the second floor by the hour."

"He remembers Loraine?"

"Very well. She lived there more than three years. I got the impression he didn't like her because she was tight-fisted."

"Did Lorilleux come to see her?"

"On my way to the Rue Pernelle I picked up a photo of Lorilleux at the Palais-Royal station. The new landlord recognized him right away."

"Lorilleux went to her room often?"

"Two or three times a month. He always had baggage with him, he always arrived around one o'clock in the morning, and always left before six. I checked the timetables. There's a train from Switzerland around midnight and another at six in the morning. He must have told his wife he was taking the six o'clock train."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing, except that Loraine was stingy with tips, and always cooked her dinner on an alcohol burner, even though the house rules said no cooking in the rooms."

"No other men?"

"No. Very respectable except for Lorilleux. The landlady was witness at her wedding."

Maigret glanced at his wife. He had insisted she remain in the room when Lucas came. She stuck to her knitting, trying to make believe she was not there.

Torrence was out in the fog, going from garage to garage, checking the trip-sheets of taxi fleets. The two men waited serenely, deep in their easy chairs, each holding a glass of plum brandy with the same pose. Maigret felt a pleasant numbness creeping over him.

His Christmas luck held out with the taxis, too. Sometimes it took days to run down a particular taxi driver, particularly when the cab in question did not belong to a fleet. Cruising drivers were the hardest to locate; they sometimes never even read the newspapers. But shortly before five o'clock, Torrence called from Saint-Ouen.

"I found one of the taxis," he reported.

"One? Was there more than one?"

"Looks that way. This man picked up the woman at the corner of Boulevard Richard-Lenoir and Boulevard Voltaire this morning. He drove her to Rue de Maubeuge, opposite the Gare du Nord, where she paid him off."

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"Did she go into the railway station?"

"No. The chauffeur says she went into a luggage shop that keeps open on Sundays and holidays. After that he doesn't know."

"Where's the driver now?"

"Right here in the garage. He just checked in."

"Send him to me, will you? Right away. I don't care how he gets here as long as it's in a hurry. Now I want you to find me the cab that brought her home."

"Sure, Chief, as soon as I get myself a coffee with a stick in it. It's damned cold out here."

Maigret glanced through the window. There was a shadow against Mlle. Doncoeur's curtains. He turned to Lucas.

"Look in the phone book for a luggage shop across from the Gare du Nord."

Lucas took only a minute to come up with a number, which Maigret dialed.

"Hello, this is the Police Judiciaire. Shortly before ten this morning a young woman bought something in your shop, probably a valise. She was a blonde, wearing a grey suit and beige hat. She carried a brown shopping bag. Do you remember her?"

Perhaps trade was slack on Christmas Day. Or perhaps it was easier to remember customers who shopped on Christmas. In any case, the voice on the phone replied:

"Certainly, I waited on her myself. She said she had to leave suddenly for Cambrai because her sister was ill, and she didn't have time to go home for her bags. She wanted a cheap valise, and I sold her a fiber model we have on sale. She paid me and went into the bar next door. I was standing in the doorway and a little later I saw her walking toward the station, carrying the valise."

"Are you alone in your shop?"

"I have one clerk on duty."

"Can you leave him alone for half an hour? Fine! Then jump in a taxi and come to this address. I'll pay the fare, of course."

"And the return fare? Shall I have the cab wait?"

"Have him wait, yes."

According to Maigret's notes on the back of the envelope, the first taxi driver arrived at 5:50 P.M. He was somewhat surprised, since he had been summoned by the police, to find himself in a private apartment. He recognized Maigret, however, and made no effort to disguise his curious interest in how the famous inspector lived.

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"I want you to climb to the fourth floor of the house just across the street. If the concierge stops you, tell her you're going to see Madame Martin."

"Madame Martin. I got it."

"Go to the door at the end of the hall and ring the bell. If a blonde opens the door and you recognize her, make some excuse—you're on the wrong floor, anything you think of. If somebody else answers, ask to speak to Madame Martin personally."

"And then?"

"Then you come back here and tell me whether or not she is the fare you drove to Rue de Maubeuge this morning."

"I'll be right back, Inspector."

As the door closed, Maigret smiled in spite of himself.

"The first call will make her worry a little. The second, if all goes well, will make her panicky. The third, if Torrence has any luck—"

Torrence, too, was having his run of Christmas luck. The phone rang and he reported:

"I think I've found him, Chief. I dug up a driver who picked up a woman answering your description at the Gare du Nord, only he didn't take her to Boulevard Richard-Lenoir. He dropped her at the corner of Boulevard Beaumarchais and the Rue du Chemin-Vert."

"Send him to me."

"He's a little squiffed."

"No matter. Where are you?"

"The Barbès garage."

"Then it won't be much out of your way to stop by the Gare du Nord. Go to the check room. Unfortunately it won't be the same man on duty, but try to find out if a small new valise was checked between 9:30 and 10 this morning. It's made of fiber and shouldn't be too heavy. Get the number of the check. They won't let you take the valise without a warrant, so try to get the name and address of the man on duty this morning."

"What next?"

"Phone me. I'll wait for your second taxi driver. If he's been drinking, better write down my address for him, so he won't get lost."

Mme. Maigret was back in the kitchen, preparing the evening meal. She hadn't dared ask whether Lucas would eat with them.

Maigret wondered if Paul Martin was still across the street with his daughter. Had Madame Martin tried to get rid of him?

The bell rang again. Two men stood at the door.

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The first driver had come back from Madame Martin's and had climbed Maigret's stairs behind the luggage dealer.

"Did you recognize her?"

"Sure. She recognized me, too. She turned pale. She ran to close a door behind her, then she asked me what I wanted."

"What did you tell her?"

"That I had the wrong floor. I think maybe she wanted to buy me off, but I didn't give her a chance. But she was watching from the window when I crossed the street. She probably knows I came here."

The luggage dealer was baffled and showed it. He was a middle-aged man, completely bald and equally obsequious. When the driver had gone, Maigret explained what he wanted, and the man objected vociferously.

"One just doesn't do this sort of thing to one's customers," he repeated stubbornly. "One simply does not inform on one's customers, you know."

After a long argument he agreed to call on Madame Martin. To make sure he didn't change his mind, Maigret sent Lucas to follow him.

They returned in less than ten minutes.

"I call your attention to the fact that I have acted under your orders, that I have been compelled—"

"Did you recognize her?"

"Will I be forced to testify under oath?"

"More than likely."

"That would be very bad for my business. People who buy luggage at the last minute are very often people who dislike public mention of their comings and goings."

"You may not have to go to court. Your deposition before the examining magistrate may be sufficient."

"Very well. It was she. She's dressed differently, but I recognized her all right."

"Did she recognize you?"

"She asked immediately who had sent me."

"What did you say?"

"I . . . I don't remember. I was quite upset. I think I said I had rung the wrong bell."

"Did she offer you anything?"

"What do you mean? She didn't even offer me a chair. Luckily. It would have been most unpleasant."

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Maigret smiled, somewhat incredulously. He believed that the taxi driver had actually run away from a possible bribe. He wasn't so sure about this prosperous-looking shopkeeper who obviously begrudged his loss of time.

"Thank you for your cooperation."

The luggage dealer departed hastily.

"And now for Number Three, my dear Lucas."

Mme. Maigret was beginning to grow nervous. From the kitchen door she made discreet signs to her husband, beckoning him to join her. She whispered: "Are you sure the father is still across the street?"

"Why?"

"I don't know. I can't make out exactly what you're up to, but I've been thinking about the child, and I'm a little afraid."

Night had long since fallen. The families were all home again. Few windows across the street remained dark. The silhouette of Mlle. Doncoeur was still very much in evidence.

While waiting for the second taxi driver, Maigret decided to put on his collar and tie. He shouted to Lucas:

"Pour yourself another drop. Aren't you hungry?"

"I'm full of sandwiches, Chief. Only one thing I'd like when we go out: a tall beer, right from the spigot."

The second driver arrived at 6:20. At 6:35 he had returned from across the street, a gleam in his eye.

"She looks even better in her negligee than she does in her street clothes," he said thickly. "She made me come in and she asked who sent me. I didn't know what to say, so I told her I was a talent scout for the Folies Bergère. Was she furious! She's a fine hunk of woman, though, and I mean it. Did you get a look at her legs?"

He was in no hurry to leave. Maigret saw him ogling the bottle of plum brandy with envious eyes, and poured him a glass—to speed him on his way.

"What are you going to do next, Chief?" Lucas had rarely seen Maigret proceed with such caution, preparing each step with such care that he seemed to be mounting an attack on some desperate criminal. And yet the enemy was only a woman, a seemingly insignificant little housewife.

"You think she'll still fight back?"

"Fiercely. And what's more, in cold blood."

"What are you waiting for?"

"The phone call from Torrence."

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As if on cue, the telephone rang. Torrence, of course.

"The valise is here all right. It feels practically empty. As you predicted, they won't give it to me without a warrant. The checkroom attendant who was on duty this morning lives in the suburbs, near La Varenne-Saint-Hilaire." A snag at last? Or at least a delay? Maigret frowned. But Torrence continued. "We won't have to go out there, though. When he finishes his day's work here, he plays cornet in a *bal musette* in the Rue de Lappe."

"Go get him for me."

"Shall I bring him to your place?"

Maigret hesitated, thinking of Lucas's yearning for a glass of draft beer.

"No, I'll be across the street. Madame Martin's apartment, fourth floor."

He took down his heavy overcoat. He filled his pipe.

"Coming?" he said to Lucas.

Mme. Maigret ran after him to ask what time he'd be home for dinner. After a moment of hesitation, he smiled.

"The usual time," was his not very reassuring answer.

"Look out for the little girl, will you?"

At ten o'clock that evening the investigation was still blocked. It was unlikely that anyone in the whole building had gone to sleep, except Colette. She had finally dozed off, with her father sitting in the dark by her bedside.

Torrence had arrived at 7:30 with his part-time musician and checkroom attendant, who declared:

"She's the one. I remember she didn't put the check in her handbag. She slipped it into a big brown shopping bag." And when they took him into the kitchen he added, "That's the bag. Or one exactly like it."

The Martin apartment was very warm. Everyone spoke in low tones, as if they had agreed not to awaken the child. Nobody had eaten. Nobody, apparently, was even hungry. On their way over, Maigret and Lucas had each drunk two beers in a little cafe on the Boulevard Voltaire.

After the cornetist had spoken his piece, Maigret took Torrence aside and murmured fresh instructions.

Every corner of the apartment had been searched. Even the photos of Martin's parents had been taken from their frames, to make sure the baggage check had not been secreted between picture and back-

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ing. The dishes had been taken from their shelves and piled on the kitchen table. The larder had been emptied and examined closely. No baggage check.

Madame Martin was still wearing her pale blue negligee. She was chain-smoking cigarettes. What with the smoke from the two men's pipes, a thick blue haze swirled about the lamps.

"You are, of course, free to say nothing and answer no questions. Your husband will arrive at 11:17. Perhaps you will be more talkative in his presence."

"He doesn't know any more than I do."

"Does he know as much?"

"There's nothing to know. I've told you everything."

She had sat back and denied everything, all along the line. She had conceded only one point. She admitted that Lorilleux had dropped in to see her two or three times at night when she lived in the Rue Pernelle. But she insisted there had been nothing between them, nothing personal.

"In other words, he came to talk business—at one o'clock in the morning?"

"He used to come to town by a late train, and he didn't like to walk the streets with large sums of money on him. I already told you he might have been smuggling gold, but I had nothing to do with it. You can't arrest me for his activities."

"Did he have large sums of money on him when he disappeared?"

"I don't know. He didn't always take me into his confidence."

"But he did come to see you in your room at night?"

Despite the evidence, she clung to her story of the morning's marketing. She denied ever having seen the two taxi drivers, the luggage dealer, or the checkroom attendant.

"If I had really left a package at the Gare du Nord, you would have found the check, wouldn't you?"

She glanced nervously at the clock on the mantel, obviously thinking of her husband's return.

"Admit that the man who came last night found nothing under the floor because you changed the hiding place."

"I know of nothing that was hidden under the floor."

"When you learned of his visit, you decided to move the treasure to the checkroom for safekeeping."

"I haven't been near the Gare du Nord. There must be thousands of blondes in Paris who answer my description."

"I think I know where we'll find the check."

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"You're so very clever."

"Sit over here at this table." Maigret produced a fountain pen and a sheet of paper. "Write your name and address."

She hesitated, then obeyed.

"Tonight every letter mailed in this neighborhood will be examined, and I'll wager we will find one addressed in your handwriting, probably to yourself."

He handed the paper to Lucas with an order to get in touch with the postal authorities. Much to his surprise, the woman reacted visibly.

"You see, it's a very old trick, Little One." For the first time he called her "Little One," the way he would have done if he were questioning her in his office, Quai des Orfèvres.

They were alone now. Maigret slowly paced the floor, while she remained seated.

"In case you're interested," Maigret said slowly, "the thing that shocks me most about you is not what you have done but the cold-blooded way you have done it. You've been dangling at the end of a slender thread since early this morning, and you still haven't blinked an eye. When your husband comes home, you'll try to play the martyr. And yet you know that sooner or later we'll discover the truth."

"But I've done nothing wrong."

"Then why do you lie?"

She did not reply. She was still far from the breaking point. Her nerves were calm, but her mind was obviously racing at top speed, seeking some avenue of escape.

"I'm not saying anything more," she declared. She sat down and pulled the hem of her negligee over her bare knees.

"Suit yourself." Maigret made himself comfortable in a chair opposite her.

"Are you going to stay here all night?" she asked.

"At least until your husband gets home."

"Are you going to tell him about Monsieur Lorilleux's visits to my room?"

"If necessary."

"You're a cad! Jean knows nothing about all this. He had no part in it."

"Unfortunately he is your husband."

When Lucas came back, they were staring at each other in silence.

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"Janvier is taking care of the letter, Chief. I met Torrence downstairs. He says the man is in that little bar, two doors down from your house."

She sprang up. "What man?"

Maigret didn't move a muscle. "The man who came here last night. You must have expected him to come back, since he didn't find what he was looking for. And he might be in a different frame of mind this time."

She cast a dismayed glance at the clock. The train from Bergerac was due in twenty minutes. Her husband could be home in forty. She asked: "You know who this man is?"

"I can guess. I could go down and confirm my suspicion. I'd say it is Lorilleux and I'd say he is very eager to get back his property."

"It's not his property!"

"Let's say that, rightly or wrongly, he considers it his property. He must be in desperate straits, this man. He came to see you twice without getting what he wanted. He came back a third time disguised as Father Christmas. And he'll come back again. He'll be surprised to find you have company. I'm convinced that he'll be more talkative than you. Despite the general belief, men always speak more freely than women. Do you think he is armed?"

"I don't know."

"I think he is. He is tired of waiting. I don't know what story you've been telling him, but I'm sure he's fed up with it. The gentleman has a vicious face. There's nothing quite as cruel as a weakling with his back up."

"Shut up!"

"Would you like us to go so that you can be alone with him?"

The back of Maigret's envelope contained the following note: "10:38 P.M.—she decides to talk."

It was not a very connected story at first. It came out in bits and pieces, fragments of sentences interlarded with venomous asides, supplemented by Maigret's own guesses, which she either confirmed or amended.

"What do you want to know?"

"Was it money that you left in the checkroom?"

"Bank notes. Almost a million."

"Did the money belong to Lorilleux?"

"No more to him than to me."

"To one of his customers?"

"Yes. A man named Julian Boissy."

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"What became of him?"

"He died."

"How?"

"He was killed."

"By whom?"

"By Monsieur Lorilleux."

"Why?"

"Because I gave him to understand that if he could raise enough money—real money—I might run away with him."

"You were already married?"

"Yes."

"You're not in love with your husband?"

"I despise mediocrity. All my life I've been poor. All my life I've been surrounded by people who have had to scrimp and save, people who have had to sacrifice and count centimes. I've had to scrimp and sacrifice and count centimes myself." She turned savagely on Maigret, as if he had been responsible for all her troubles. "I just didn't want to be poor any more."

"Would you have gone away with Lorilleux?"

"I don't know. Perhaps for a while."

"Long enough to get your hands on his money?"

"I hate you!"

"How was Boissy murdered?"

"Monsieur Boissy was a regular customer of long standing."

"Pornographic literature?"

"He was a lascivious old goat, sure. So are all men. So is Lorilleux. So are you, probably. Boissy was a widower. He lived alone in a hotel room. He was very rich and very stingy. All rich people are stingy."

"That doesn't work both ways, does it? You, for instance, are not rich."

"I would have been rich."

"If Lorilleux had not come back. How did Boissy die?"

"The devaluation of the franc scared him out of his wits. Like everybody else at that time, he wanted gold. Monsieur Lorilleux used to shuttle gold in from Switzerland pretty regularly. And he always demanded payment in advance. One afternoon Monsieur Boissy came to the shop with a fortune in currency. I wasn't there. I had gone out on an errand."

"You planned it that way?"

"No."

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"You had no idea what was going to happen?"

"No. Don't try to put words in my mouth. When I came back, Lorilleux was packing the body into a big box."

"And you blackmailed him?"

"No."

"Then why did he disappear after having given you the money?"

"I frightened him."

"You threatened to go to the police?"

"No. I merely told him that our neighbors in the Palais-Royal had been looking at me suspiciously and that I thought he ought to put the money in a safe place for a while. I told him about the loose floorboard in my apartment. He thought it would only be for a few days. Two days later he asked me to cross the Belgian frontier with him."

"And you refused?"

"I told him I'd been stopped and questioned by a man who looked like a police inspector. He was terrified. I gave him some of the money and promised to join him in Brussels as soon as it was safe."

"What did he do with the corpse?"

"He put the box in a taxi and drove to a little country house he owned on the banks of the Marne. I suppose he either buried it there or threw it into the river. Nobody ever missed Monsieur Boissy."

"So you sent Lorilleux to Belgium without you. How did you keep him away for five years?"

"I used to write him, general delivery. I told him the police were after him, and that he probably would read nothing about it in the papers because they were setting a trap for him. I told him the police were always coming back to question me. I even sent him to South America."

"He came back two months ago?"

"About. He was at the end of his rope."

"Didn't you send him any money?"

"Not much."

"Why not?"

She did not reply. She looked at the clock.

"Are you going to arrest me? What will be the charge? I didn't kill Boissy. I wasn't there when he was killed. I had nothing to do with disposing of his body."

"Stop worrying about yourself. You kept the money because all your life you wanted money—not to spend, but to keep, to feel secure, to feel rich and free from want."

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"That's my business."

"When Lorilleux came back to ask for money, or to ask you to keep your promise and run away with him, you used Colette as a pretext. You tried to scare him into leaving the country again, didn't you?"

"He stayed in Paris, hiding." Her upper lip curled slightly. "What an idiot! He could have shouted his name from the housetops and nobody would have noticed."

"The business of Father Christmas wasn't idiotic."

"No? The money wasn't under the floorboard any longer. It was right here under his nose, in my sewing basket."

"Your husband will be here in ten or fifteen minutes. Lorilleux across the street probably knows it. He's been in touch with Bergerac by phone, and he can read a timetable. He's surely armed. Do you want to wait here for your two men?"

"Take me away! I'll slip on a dress—"

"The checkroom stub?"

"General delivery, Boulevard Beaumarchais."

She did not close the bedroom door after her. Brazenly she dropped the negligee from her shoulders and sat on the edge of the bed to pull on her stockings. She selected a woolen dress from the closet, tossed toilet articles and lingerie into an overnight bag.

"Let's hurry!"

"Your husband?"

"That fool? Leave him for the birds."

"Colette?"

She shrugged.

Mlle. Doncoeur's door opened a crack as they passed.

Downstairs on the sidewalk she clung fearfully to the two men, peering into the fog.

"Take her to the Quai des Orfèvres, Lucas. I'm staying here."

She held back. There was no car in sight, and she was obviously frightened by the prospect of walking into the night with only Lucas to protect her. Lucas was not very big.

"Don't be afraid. Lorilleux is not in this vicinity."

"You lied to me! You—you—"

Maigret went back into the house.

The conference with Jean Martin lasted two hours.

When Maigret left the house at one thirty, the two brothers were in serious conversation. There was a crack of light under Mlle. Don-

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coeur's door, but she did not open the door as he passed.

When he got home, his wife was asleep in a chair in the dining room. His place was still set. Mme. Maigret awoke with a start.

"You're alone?" When he looked at her with amused surprise, she added, "Didn't you bring the little girl home?"

"Not tonight. She's asleep. You can go for her tomorrow morning."

"Why, then we're going to—"

"No, not permanently. Jean Martin may console himself with some decent girl. Or perhaps his brother will get back on his feet and find a new wife."

"In other words, she won't be ours?"

"Not in fee simple, no. Only on loan. I thought that would be better than nothing. I thought it would make you happy."

"Why, yes, of course. It will make me very happy. But . . . but . . ."

She sniffed once and fumbled for her handkerchief. When she couldn't find it, she buried her face in her apron.

—translated by Lawrence G. Blochman

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PRIME-TIME CRIME

by KEN WILKINS

He did his thieving in department stores
From bargain basements to topmost floors.
Considered an expert in his shady trade,
A drastic mistake he eventually made.
He failed to notice the camera lens
Recording his thefts in Ladies and Mens.
He ponders his fate from a prison cell
For his TV debut did not go well.

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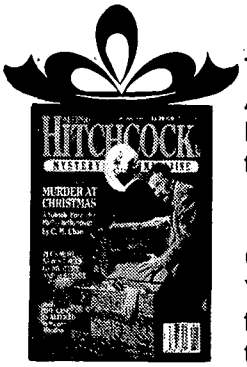

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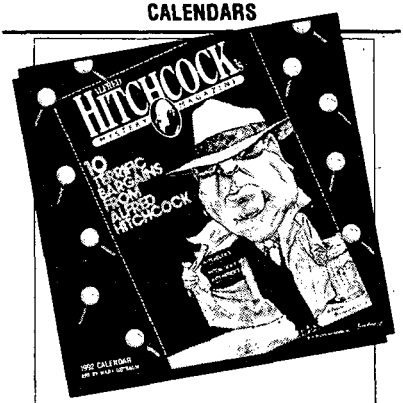

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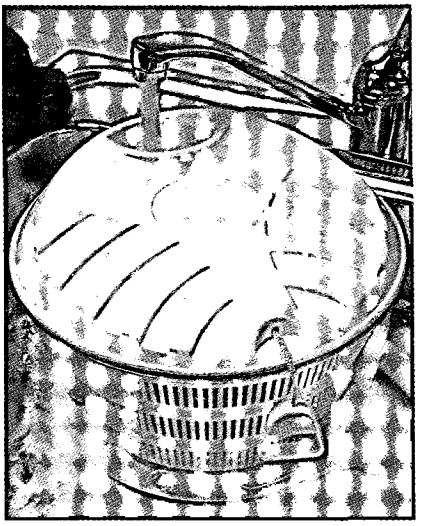

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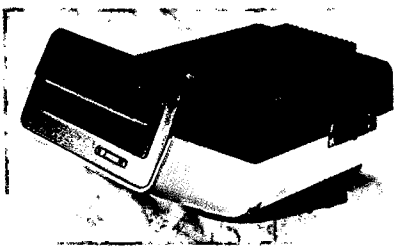

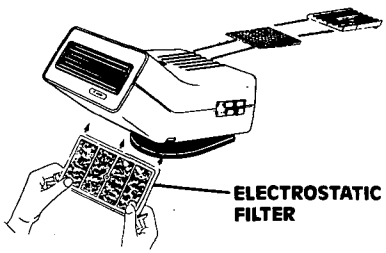

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